

ALL IN A MAN'S KEEPING

MEG DYAN

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THE
HAZARD OF CONCEALING;
OR,
ALL IN A MAN'S KEEPING.

BY
MEG DYAN.

“I waive the quantum o’ the sin,
The hazard of concealing;
But, och! it hardens a’ within
And petrifies the feeling.”

—*Burns.*

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ALL IN A MAN'S KEEPING.

CHAPTER I.

THE cold season was being brought to a close in the station of Peshawur by a full-dress ball in honour of the Commander-in-Chief; the different regiments gathered there had, one and all, vied with each other to do honour to the occasion and make the ceremony a success. And such, without doubt, it was likely to be. For days the huge mess-room of the "Chota Ruffles," who were the principal instigators of the affair, had been a scene of activity, and its roof had echoed to the ceaseless chatter of the crowd of native servants, who, under the surveillance of their enthusiastic masters, had turned the bare-looking place into a fitting hall for the proposed revelries.

The long unsightly lines and floating frills which usually adorned the roof had vanished. A delicious cool air still prevailed, and needed

not to be set in motion by flopping punkahs with their necessary accessories of coolies, squatting, like the missing link in the great Darwinian theory, round about the wide verandah to the disturbance of the couples who would presently stroll there in search of dark corners and blissful seclusion.

For to-night was to be the end of many things. It was the old, old story, repeated over and over again, ever since, in the long past ages, one had cried, "Let us eat, drink, and be merry, for to-morrow we die." Not so tragic an end in this case, as far as outward vision judges—not die—oh, no! only separate. And yet is not separation often but another name for death—death in life? A far harder death to endure than the mere folding of tired hands over a no longer aching heart, the shutting of weary eyes that have lost their "light of life." *That* is not death, that is the "sleep" that "never doleful dream again shall break," and which, happily, must come even to the longest death in life.

There is about Indian life a certain epicurean facility of "*Carpe Diem*," a moth-like tendency to flutter round the candle and reckon not of the burnt wings which put the climax to the dazzling intoxication. "*Sufficient unto the day is the pleasure thereof*," is the travestied motto of that gay, spontaneous burst of life. The long hot months drag monotonously on while the jaded exiles in that far-off country feel too inert for activity of

any kind, mental or physical, save the daily round of gossip which would flourish at the Equator or the North Pole as long as tongues were there to wag it. Circumstances turn life for a time into mere existence. But the life is there all the same, slumbering only to awaken at the first touch of rousing influence of the cold season with a vigour and abandon which often shock and amaze those carping, because non-understanding, outsiders, who are supposed to see most of the game. Here, however, is played a game beyond their narrow comprehension, just because it is beyond the possible for them to make reasonable allowances for the exigencies of that game. Human nature must have way ; the greater the repression the more violent the reaction. And so our Anglo-Indian brother and sister are judged by a hard chill code which may suit the cold, more evenly-balanced life of the mother-country, but which admits of no margin for others because it needs none for its own followers. Those who can "have their fling" all the year round do not need to press all light, and life, and love into one short spell of a few weeks snatched from the dull round of months of stagnation and often isolation ; so the flirtation, to use an ugly hackneyed word, which in England would spin lukewarmly out for months and escape criticism, must in India be carried out at break-neck speed.

In those distant hill stations youth and beauty

meet on the level ground of equality of rank. So there are fewer restrictions, less of the ceremonious clannishness of English society, because there is a feeling from the very outset of camaraderie. Acquaintanceships of a day ripen into friendship—often into something deeper. There is an almost desperate feeling pervading both sexes to seize Time by the forelock, a tendency to grasp at all and every pleasure without pausing to weigh discretion or count up possible after-results. There is little studying of the red book, the “Peerage or the Beerage,” not so much vulgar scramble for superiority—are they not all one jât or caste? Everyone is in “the Service,” civil or military, with but few exceptions, and those exceptions are generally franked by riches and pass anywhere. All are well-educated, most are well-born. They carry their credentials with them; no wonder, then, that flirtations are fast and furious. Over each one of that gay, seemingly heedless throng, which “have met like ships upon the sea,” hangs ever the Damoclean sword of separation—here to-day, gone to-morrow. The hair which holds it up, and which is secured so uncertainly to a nail in a certain office, may be cut at any moment, and it may fall with the dividing swiftness of steel. Any day that dashing young sub may get his “marching orders.” Can one wonder then, that he seizes with almost reckless daring at every golden moment of bliss? That sweet-

eyed gentle maiden, who has shared with him the rapture of those stolen hours, may awaken to-morrow to hear the strains of "The girl he left behind him" dying away in the distance, while her torn heart throbs time to each faint note. He has gone! Memory only is left, and perchance regret. Regret that she allowed propriety, dread of Mrs. Grundy, discretion, fear—call it what you will, that cruel law of conventional society which narrows every instinct and dwarfs all human passion—to overrule her to the spoiling of those moments of honeyed sweetness. Well, it is over! The thread has snapped, the sword has fallen and cut them asunder, just as it has done many a thousand times before, and just as it will go on dividing souls until time and love have ceased to be.

"When sweet things are no more,
Better not think of them!"

Only—only—— Ah well, that is another old, old story we needs must all learn, and those in far-off India have to learn it sooner and oftener than those at home.

For it must be admitted that nowhere on the face of the globe are the temptations to play with Fate greater than there during those short cold-season spells. The women are young, and doubly attractive with the roses of Simla and Cashmeer blooming in their cheeks, and the men—often the pick of the gallant dashing

wearers of her Majesty's becoming uniform—are glowing with health and vigour after the daily drills and the hunts with the bobbery packs. Youth, beauty, enthusiasm, and the spur of *tempus fugit* to prick them on, what more is needed? Nothing but lenient merciful judges when the “afterwards” comes to them.

The final touches had been given; the last of the early roses added to the decorations, and the hall was in readiness to receive the guests. The walls were gay with bunting, here and there relieved by big stars of bayonets and wondrous Indian trophies of shields and swords from battle-fields, and strange Afghan knives mingling with the long lances and brilliant pennons of the Bengal Lancers. Throughout the whole of the arrangements rare taste and refinement had been shown. There was none of that “Jack-in-the-green” sort of gaudy crudeness of colouring so often prominently displayed in ball-room garniture.

And now all was finished and ready, and the two or three subs who had lingered to pronounce verdict on the satisfactory whole, linked arms, and passed gaily through the verandah and across the compound to their bungalows.

“Rosie, when you are dressed, come to my room; I want to speak to you.”

Mrs. Yorke stood at the door of communica-

tion between her own boudoir and her daughter's bedroom.

The girl looked back over her shoulder, and there was a slightly startled look on her face.

"Yes, mamma, I will be with you in a minute. I have only my necklace and gloves to put on."

"Oh, very well; bring your gloves in with you, you can be putting them on in my room." The stately figure in the doorway vanished.

The dark-fingered ayah continued her operation of pulling out the frills round her young mistress's trailing robe, glancing up now and then rather curiously at the fair face over which a sudden cloud had come to dim its radiance.

"Missee baba no look happy!" said the sympathetic woman at last, as she rose from her squatting posture and put her brown slim hand on the white arm of the girl. "Missee, see!"

She crossed to a table, and presently came forward bearing a bouquet of the most lovely white flowers and delicate greenery. In the centre was a small slip of paper snugly hidden under the petals of a white rose.

"Oh!" The girl put out her hands, seized the posy, and buried her face in it, while right up to her forehead rose a crimson flush.

A broad gleam of white teeth showed between the thick lips of the ayah. *She* knew the tonic to bring back roses and dimples to

her beloved charge's face, and she went on calmly putting the finishing touches to the dainty gown.

Rose drew the scrap of paper out from its flowery bed, and opened it. In pencil scrawl were the words, "Yours ever and ever, Dick." The cloud had fled now, and a perfect flood of happy sunlight shone on the girl's face as she slipped the tiny bit of paper, pressing it first to her lips, far down beneath the dainty lace which covered her bosom. Then she took up her gloves and fan, and sought her mother. The General's wife faced her daughter as she approached, and watched her keenly as she came up the long room.

"Will I do, mamma?" the girl asked a little diffidently, and colouring with a pretty air of shyness under the scrutiny.

"Yes, dear. Your gown is very effective." And Mrs. Yorke pulled out the lace here and there as it drooped about the edge of the bodice. Rose's hand went up for a moment with the uncontrollable instinct of protection we all have when a dearly-loved object seems likely to be assailed, and covered the left side of her low neck, and she flushed more rosy still. The consciousness of that smuggled paper made her nervous, but it was too securely hidden to court observation. "Ah, you have some flowers already? There is a beautiful bouquet waiting for you here in my room; I

kept it as a pleasant little surprise for you. Mr. Elliott kindly sent it for you. Have those been sent too?"

"Yes, mamma. They came a short time ago. Aren't they lovely?" And the girl laid her cheek tenderly on the fragrant mass for a moment and then held it up for her mother's closer inspection.

"Yes, they are very dainty, but a touch of colour would set off your gown better I almost think. Let us try the effect of Mr. Elliott's flowers, Rosie."

"Oh, mamma, please," the girl began, half hesitatingly, she so rarely disputed the slightest word of her mother, "I do think all white looks best. Mr. Elliott's bouquet is so big, and I am so small myself, it looks nearly as large round as I am." Her hold on the bouquet under discussion tightened.

"Who sent you those flowers, Rose?"

"Di—— Mr. Urquhart, mamma." Do what she would, the girl could not keep the flaming colour out of her tell-tale face as the familiar name nearly slipped out.

The watchful eyes of her mother caught instantly the betraying signs, her quick ears heard the faint softening of the voice over the name.

"Rose," she said, "I want to speak seriously to you. I guessed, of course, who the donor was. Now you must understand there is to be no—

no nonsense with Mr. Urquhart to-night, nor, indeed, at any future time."

"Mamma!"

"Oh, my dear, don't put on that tragic air. It can only be called by that name, of course, as there is nothing beyond a mere foolish flirtation in the whole affair. How many dances have you promised this young man?"

"Oh, mamma!" with a little gasp and a swift flush at such crude, matter-of-fact summing up of that delicious, unspeakable-about dream, "I did not promise anything. I—Mr. Urquhart——" she became incoherent, and the bouquet in her hand trembled and the girlish heart under the scrap of paper throbbed suffocatingly.

"Well, dear, I cannot have you allowing Mr. Urquhart to monopolise you this evening as he did at Lady Alden's yesterday afternoon. There must be no loitering in corners, mind. You have encouraged him too much. He may think you mean more than the little harmless fun which, *of course*, is all it really is."

The girl looked up quickly, a frightened expression coming into her eyes. She did not comprehend this sudden change in her mother's behaviour. Heretofore young Urquhart had been as great a favourite with mother as with daughter, and Rose's "little harmless fun" had been permitted to run on unchecked.

"I thought, mamma——" she began wistfully.

"Never mind what you thought, Rose, I will

do all the thinking that is necessary for you. You do as I bid you. Trust your mother, dear Mr. Urquhart is no match for you."

"Oh, indeed!" the girl said, her face crimsoning painfully as she heard the delicious vagueness of her thoughts put thus into hard, business-like terms, "I never thought of anything——"

"Of course you didn't, but others think, my dear, and, as I said before, Mr. Urquhart is no match for you *now*."

"Why now? How is he different from what he has ever been? Mamma, you *must* tell me what you mean." It was the girl's first assertion of her rights as a woman to have some share in the disposal of her feelings, timidly raised and crushed at once.

"You will understand all about it some day, Rosie, dear child. For the present what I tell you must suffice. Trust your mother, Rose; she is your truest friend. Mr. Urquhart is not what your father and I imagined him to be; and, my dear child, you would never do to be poor. Imagine living here or some other outlandish station without horses or carriages, with only a subaltern's buggy, *if* you could afford even that—no gowns from England, no—— Well, imagine yourself poor like Captain Henderson's wife, and then you will understand what I mean. Think of crossing as a second-class passenger on the steamers! So be cautious, child, and spare yourself and him future pain. I trust you."

"Mamma, tell me, do you mean that Mr. Urquhart is poor? I thought——"

"So did everyone else, Rose; but don't let us talk further on this subject. Now run down and tell your father that I am coming directly. I will be there by the time you have found him. He had a letter to send off."

Rose Yorke walked slowly down the stairs, across the dimly-lit hall, and out on to the wide steps of the entrance. The carriage stood before the porch on the gravelled sweep. The handsome thoroughbreds pawed the ground restively and the waiting syces stood about as motionless as bronze statues. The girl's eyes travelled on past the barouche, across to the distant lighted bungalows sprinkled about the cantonment. A blaze of illumination marked the spot where the mess-room of the "*Chota Ruffles*" stood. Her gaze rested there for a moment, then moved further on to the many tiny stars, the "*lesser lights*" from the subalterns' quarters. Again her face crimsoned violently, then paled, and her eyelids quivered. Which of those twinkling lights was shining on *him*? She swept her hand impatiently across her eyes to clear the mist before them, which was making that small terrestrial star-patch dance about as if an earthquake had suddenly visited it. Her lips moved.

"A subaltern's buggy, if you could afford that!" She shuddered, and the rich silk of her trailing gown rustled and shimmered in the

lamplight. A vision of Mrs. Henderson manufacturing, with the incompetent aid of her durzee, a gown for the ball out of a turned silk that had already seen two seasons' wear, with her face red and puckered into innumerable wrinkles as she strove to work out the complexities of a cut-out paper pattern and a fashion plate, made a shiver of distaste run through Miss Yorke, and her fingers fondly stroked the rich texture of her own perfect garment. "Me like Mary Henderson! A second-class passenger on the P. and O.!" That little shiver as it crossed her face took with it some of the fresh untouched bloom of her girlhood. It was her first contact with life as our poor ambitions have made it, not with life as the God of Love meant it to be, and the result was an ugly smirch.

Meanwhile, upstairs in her room, Mrs. Yorke still lingered, leaning heavily against the edge of her dressing-table. The lines on her forehead and round her handsome mouth showed more distinctly than she ever permitted them to do in public. A shadow from out the past had fallen darkly over her face. Her eyes were almost tragic in their sudden gloom.

"My poor little girl! Poor little Rose! How far has it gone, I wonder? Will she feel it beyond a mere surface scratch? Must my child go through what I—— Ah, twenty-two years ago! Twenty-two years!" She put up one

firm white hand and passed it over her face. Perhaps she felt the pressure of those lines Memory was deepening there to-night with heavy relentless finger. "Just such a night as this! And I wore white too. And we danced—he and I together through those hours—ah, have I ever *danced* since, heart and feet in one thrilling valse of joy! We thought then life was to be one long valse together, always together. And—he lies in a lonely grave, and his name is cut with a host of others on a lump of stone and stuck up on Southsea Parade for every passer-by to read. On a lump of stone! They are cut deep in women's hearts where no eye may read them. And I have lived on and learnt that life is not dancing, but the sober set tread of a deadly quadrille. Oh, what a foolish old woman I am! Tears in my eyes? Impossible! And yet I expect sense from a girl of seventeen. Why is it all the men who are worth loving are poor, and wild, and head-over-ears in debt? No, no, it cannot, it must not be. Rose could never endure poverty. She must marry John Elliott, and I will get her away from here at once, away from young Urquhart's vicinity. Poor boy, he loves her. Those eyes of his tell tales. What beautiful eyes they are! What is it someone says:—

'Eyes too expressive to be blue,
Too lovely to be grey.'

What nonsense ! One must only mind nowadays how the purse is lined, and the colour of an eye will do for pictures and poets !”

The matter was settled—the fate of a man and a woman decided while Mrs. Yorke touched up her face to remove the traces of those moments of emotion. Love and riches were in the scale. It does not need to tell the sequel. Gold was to console the girl, consolation for the man had somehow been forgotten. And in that Dick Urquhart was fortunate. Consolation provided by an outsider does not always produce satisfactory results. We sometimes stupidly prefer to sit awhile and moan on the shattered ruins of our castle in the air, instead of being roused by the offer of a commonsense trowel and mortar wherewith to build us a more matter-of-fact and lasting abode out of the crumbled remains.

A few minutes later the General's carriage, with its turban-crested servants and dainty freight, was bowling swiftly along the road which led past the many clustering officers' quarters to the mess-room of the “Chota Ruffles.”

CHAPTER II.

IN the verandah of one of those little bungalows a young man sat in a wicker lounge chair, his long legs stretched out easefully before him, some opened letters lying about on the table near him and on the floor at his feet. The mail had just come in. If he had not been so lazily inclined he would have been dressed ere this and in the mess-room; the letters would have reposed there undisturbed until morning, and Dick Urquhart's whole life might have borne another complexion. Instead of displaying such energy he had sat down for a few minutes to speculate if his bouquet had reached "her" yet, and if so what she was doing with it; would her eyes spy out the kiss and the scrap of paper he had put in that centre rose, as pure and white and lovely as herself, his own darling little "White Rose"—but at this point his thoughts had become involved and too meandering for us to follow them.

The entrance of the bearer with the mail had roused him. One sheet of paper sparsely

covered with writing was in his hand still. It was foreign paper, and the envelope belonging to it bore a crest and an English postmark. The young fellow's face was very white, and there was a dark frown between his brows. He had been sitting in this position for some minutes, perfectly immovable, letting the minutes pass unheeded by, his sombre eyes fixed on his boots and his right hand holding the thin missive.

From an adjoining room came a clear voice whistling snatches of melody, occasionally interrupted to admit of an impatient ejaculation. A brush fell with a clatter on to the floor, but the noise did not rouse the motionless dreamer. Presently the door was jerked open and the voice came out with a shout. It was elevated to carry across the common sitting-room to the other bedroom on the further side.

"I say, Urquhart, old chap, can you lend——Hallo, Dick, what's up? Aren't you going to the jig? Why on earth haven't you begun to dress? I say, are you ill? What is it, Urquhart?"

The body belonging to the voice had come in and was standing in shirt sleeves, a brush in one hand, staring at the occupant of the chaise longue. The man addressed as "Urquhart, old chap," lifted up his head, which had sunk forward on to his chest in an attitude of profound depression. For a moment there was a dazed

flicker in his eyes. He had not yet come back to the present. The young sub had crossed over to him now, and was sitting hooked on to a corner of the table by one leg, with the foot swinging.

"By Jove!" he ejaculated, "has anything gone wrong, Urquhart? You look as if you had seen a ghost."

"So I have, Mackenzie, the ghost of the future. And it was ugly—damned ugly!"

"Gad, you have! There's only one cure for that." The subaltern swung off his perch and walked across to a small cupboard. He fidgeted about there for a minute, then there was heard the sound of pouring, a pop, and then a fizz. Mackenzie returned with a tall tumbler in his hand. "Here, swallow this on the homœopathic principle, you know, like curing like dodge. It's pretty stiffish—warranted to drive spirits, ghosts, and blue devils away, I reckon." His eyes had lighted by now on the scattered papers, the look of some of which he recognised. Such sort often came to him too, and he gave vent to a low whistle. Those were "blue devils" with a vengeance!

"Look here, Dick, old chap, I don't want to pry into your private affairs, you know that——"

Urquhart put out his unoccupied left hand. His comrade seized it in a grip that spoke volumes for his muscular training, and did not continue his speech at once. The loosely sway-

ing leg, for he had returned to his former and habitual pose, worked vigorously, perhaps to let off a superfluity of embarrassing emotion. Then he went on.

"There's only one kind of ghost I know of that can knock a man all of a heap like this, and that's bills. D—n 'em, say I. Well, I'm not good for much as you know, but if a couple of hundred is any good to you, Urquhart, it's yours. Would to God it ran to fours. Cheer up, old boy, don't let a thing like this scare you. I *might* make it three hundred," he added, after a short pause, the while he had intently scanned the haggard countenance of his chum, and a vision of a mare, on which he had had his eye for many a day, cantered across his mental horizon and vanished into the region of the unattainable.

Urquhart raised his head again. There was a gleam of light on his face, caused perhaps by a suspicious brightness on his eyelashes. He was only a youngster after all at heart, though he had such a manly form and martial air. He roused himself, put down the emptied tumbler, and dragged his body forward to the edge of the chair to pick up the letter.

"You are a brick, Guy, but you don't need me to tell you that—only—well"—with a huge sigh—"it's no use. I am done for this time—stone broke. Those howling wolves will have me at last."

"Oh, come, old fellow, this is worse than I expected. Don't, for Heaven's sake, talk like that. Confound the mail! What did they want to bring it in to-night for?"

Urquhart smiled mirthlessly as he said :

"Don't blame the mail,—the thing had to come. I knew it all along, though I tried to persuade myself, when I thought of it at all, which was seldom as possible, you bet, that I was only crossing bridges before I came up to them. I've been a fool and played a fool's game. Now I must pay. My father writes to-night that he must absolutely refuse to tide me over any more. It's no good, Guy, I am swamped. Poor old dad! He feels it as much as I do; his writing, poor old chap, is all shaky. I suppose he is fair, he must be just to the others—there are the girls you know. He has no right to stint them for my sake; they must have their portion all square whatever happens to me. It's a deuced ugly business. I can't tell you how I feel about it all. Somehow one always clings to and believes in that fatuous creed of 'something turning up.' Well, my God, something *has* turned up for me to-night! This is the end, old chap. And somehow, after all, it's a relief to know the worst. Those cursed bills! They seemed to get beyond me. I don't know how it all happened. I've had the Devil's own luck lately; every effort I made to get out of the mud seemed only to drive me further into it.

And one of the bitterest things of all is the thought of bringing disgrace on the dear old regiment." He broke off, and a stifled groan sounded through the sparsely furnished room. His elbows were propped up on his knees and he buried his face in his hands.

Guy Mackenzie worked his leg more energetically than ever, and rumbled up the immaculately prepared hair on which he had spent so many minutes, reducing it to the regulation flatness necessary to an officer of Her Gracious Majesty.

"Blow the regiment! Blow the whole blooming thing!" he burst out, with deep feeling if with inelegance. "Look here, Dick, make a clean breast of it to the chief, and let him talk it over with the General. He'll pull you through—the General's awful partial to you, old chap! We'll all help you!" with an assured generosity that spoke volumes for the popularity of the Senior Subaltern.

"What!" roared Urquhart, bouncing up and knocking the tumbler, which had been on the arm of his chair, with a crash to the floor. "Tell the General—tell *General Yorke*! Are you mad, man?"

"By Jove! I forgot. I beg your pardon for being so brutal. Now I understand. Gad, but it's hard lines. You *are* down on your luck this time, and no mistake about it, Urquhart."

"Yes, Guy, I am. It's the thought of *her* that

unmans me. I don't care a hang about myself. Better fellows than I have faced worse difficulties. I see it all to-night as I never saw it before. It has been an unmanly——"

"Confound you, Dick, I can't listen to that! Don't call yourself names before me or I shall have to stop you summarily. *You* unmanly! Oh, Lord, what is the world coming to—what *is* the world coming to when I hear Dick Urquhart called unmanly!"

"Ah, Guy, you are the best of chums; a fellow never had such another, but I am not worth such friendship. I have done wrong. I see it now—wrong to her whom I ——" He checked himself abruptly, then continued: "I ought to have more carefully considered my affairs before I let her see—but I never could stop to think of anything but her from the first moment she came to Peshawur. It was like a fever. Now to-night I see the hideousness of my behaviour. Suppose she cares too—suppose she feels for me—just a little of what I feel for her! God grant she does not, but I fear." His voice and broke, something bright glistened on his dark eyelashes. "I would give my life to save her an hour's pain, and yet I may be the one to bring her the bitterest pain she has ever known. It is the thought of her, Guy, that is making me like a weak fool to-night. All my strength to bear up is gone."

"Oh, come, Urquhart, you are upset and take

a morbid view of affairs just now. Brace yourself up and face the thing. It may not be as bad as you think. There is sure to be some way out of it, if you will only hold on a little longer. If she is worth having at all she will only stick closer to you when bad luck comes. My advice is tell her all, if it would be any relief to you. I always tell my little woman everything, and, Gad! it does help one!" he said, ending the sentence softly to himself, as a brief smile stole over his face. "She knows you care for her?" he asked, after a moment's pause, while Urquhart's face sank on to his hands again.

"Care for her! She must have seen it all along. Yes, I care for her so much that I could wish I had never seen her, my fear of giving her one tithe of the suffering I am enduring is so great. I have not really ever told her, Guy, what I feel, what I hoped ——"

"Does a girl need telling in *words* when a fellow has got eyes like yours! You bet, she knows all about what you feel. They are awfully cute, girls, in these things, though they know so little of all we know. Bless 'em for it, too. It does help a fellow so!" And young Mackenzie blushed furiously. "But are you as sure about her as you are about yourself?" he added.

He did not like to say it, but he had always had a slight mistrust of the "Yorke Rose" as

his friend's divinity had come to be christened in Peshawur.

She was lovely, he cordially admitted, fair as the day, but too gentle, too yielding. She lacked the spice of *diablerie* that must go to the making of a woman if she is to be strong and true. He knew the girl was entirely under her mother's thumb, and Mrs. Yorke showed clearly that she had an eye to the main chance, and did not mean to raise that digit until she had quite decided that it would be for her daughter's worldly advantage to do so. Suppose Rose Yorke failed her lover! Then, indeed, did his friend fear for Dick Urquhart's future. There had always been a terrible amount of recklessness about him combined with a certain vein of weakness, almost instability; there was no knowing what he might not do if desperate.

Now he flushed a dull red at Mackenzie's question. He sprang from his seat, strode impatiently about the small room, then came back and flung himself back into his seat once more.

"Her mother, you know——" he began.

"Confound the mothers, say I. Can't they remember that they were young once themselves?"

"That's just it, Mackenzie. It is just because they do remember it all so particularly clearly that they are so cautious where their children are concerned. They have learnt by experience,

you know, and know everything. A fellow never stands a fair chance with the maternal eagle eye always on the watch. That sickening old brute, Elliott, has been fooling round making up to the General and Mrs. Yorke lately. He's rolling in wealth. *His* fortune's made. No debts there, you bet, except other people's. Mrs. Yorke knows that. Yesterday, at Lady Alden's, I wondered if she knew anything about me. She has always been deucedly civil to me until then. But yesterday she had quite changed her tune. She gave me the coolest of nods, and did nothing but try to separate Ro— Miss Yorke and me. Not that I let her succeed. I saw that fool Elliott flopping round. Lord! how like a yellow-boiled hippopotamus the man is! So I just marched Rose off (the name slipped out unchecked this time) right under her mother's nose. She was talking to Sir Henry and could not make a grab at us as she looked as if she wanted to do. I saw it all. I wonder if Elliott has found out anything about my affairs; he seems to know everyone's monetary status. I meant to put it all straight to-night with—with—I never counted on the governor cutting up like this! I meant to get square and turn over a new leaf for evermore. I thought if she——” He flung himself back into his chair again, and the transitory colour the stimulating “B. and S.” had brought to his face faded away and left it ghastly in its pallor.

"Look here, old fellow," said Mackenzie, tapping his near arm with the back of his brush, "think no more about the dashed thing now. Things always seem black just at first. Look how many a thunder-cloud one sees which blows over without ever coming to a storm at all. Go and get into your things. Put all this out of your head, and to-morrow you won't feel a bit like you do now. Come, rouse yourself. We shall be awfully late and miss our partners."

Urquhart pulled himself with an effort together.

"Yes, better put in an appearance, I suppose. You are a patient old chap to have listened like this to my maudlin weakness. Lord, how little I feel like dancing! It's like performing a fandango at one's own funeral. I wonder how one feels after one's burial? I suppose I shall know soon."

Mackenzie had reached his bedroom door and was passing in when he caught the last words. He came back quickly to his comrade's side.

"Urquhart," he said sharply, looking straight into the haggard face before him, "I know this is an infernally bad business, your face tells me that. But don't do anything rash. Don't do anything—— Well, old fellow, remember your father at home. If *she* to-night does not give you something to live for and face any odds for, then for the old man's sake, I say, don't

be in a hurry. You are such a fellow to fly off at a tangent, there's never any holding yôu. You're hipped now naturally. Wait till you've seen her; she'll make things look different, I bet. Forgive me for waxing verbose like a Methodist parson, but I'm deosid fond of you."

He gave his friend a resounding slap on the shoulder with the monogrammed brush he had held on to during the whole of the interview, and departed hurriedly, overwhelmed with the shame a man feels at having betrayed anything beyond common interest in one of his own sex.

"Poor devil!" he said to the reflection in his mirror the while he repaired the damage he had done to his "thatch," as he graphically styled his hair. "I fear it's all U.P. with him. Lord! what a grind life is to the best of us! And he's the very pick of us all! Dash it all, I'd like to have a fling at something! If I could only count on that girl turning out trumps! but I don't like her—never did like those yellow-haired, milk-and-water ones. Give me a spice of devilry that may fly out and scorch you now and then when least expected, but that will glow like a furnace for you when needed. None of your lukewarm businesses for me! Poor old chap!"

CHAPTER III.

THE ball had reached its zenith and was waning to its close. The jaded dancers, weary from much dancing and exhausted by the heat, were lounging about, watching with almost pity the energetic few who still whirled round to the feeble music of the band. For even bandsmen feel the temperature and the strain of many hours. The lights from the myriads of Chinese lanterns flickered as the gay paper balls waved about in the tiny breeze which had risen as herald of the approaching morn. The dark uniform of the "Chota Ruffles," with its silver appointments, its black braid, and ever recurring motto, "Celer et Audax," contrasted sharply with the brilliant green and gold and gorgeous cummerbund from the looms of Cashmeer of the Irregular Cavalry. The "Death or Glory" boys in their sombre blue and broad scarlet breasts like pouter pigeons, elbowed their way past the workman-like Sikh officers in khaki; here and there a gorgeous Horse Gunner, one mass of gold braid from which the elbows

peeped queerly out, as if the trimming had run short, chatted to a sober khaki chum; and through them all, like dazzling fireflies, darted the innumerable scarlet tunics of the British Infantry, the whole kaleidoscopic scene harmonised by the softening touches of the shimmering white and misty laces of the ladies. In and out among them strolled the towering form of the Commander-in-Chief, his gaunt handsome old face wearing its bright smile of welcome for all as he lingered to drop a deftly-turned compliment to some blushing débutante, to exchange a genial pleasantry with an officer, or to pass a small joke with an embarrassed, but nevertheless hugely delighted, youngster. But now the pleasure devotees were beginning to depart; elderly dames with relief that the tedious duties of chaperonage were over, merry damsels with regretful backward glances at their numerous martial satellites.

Out through the wide open verandah and across the compound towards a clump of oleander bushes strolled a couple. The man paused for one moment at the foot of the steps to knot his silk handkerchief about the girl's bare throat. Not that the precaution was necessary: the air which blew past them was soft and warm as a midsummer's noon. They were not speaking. The girl was humming fitfully the tune of the last waltz, the while her fingers beat time on the coat sleeve of his arm, through which her

little bare hand was passed. He was absorbed in thought so deep that at last his silence arrested her attention. The humming stopped abruptly and she looked up at him. It was as yet too dark to see his face, the handsomest, bonniest face in his regiment, or she might have wondered at the extreme pallor which showed even through the rich sunburn.

"Haven't you anything to say, after all, Dick?" she asked. "You told me you had something to tell me when you were persuading me to come out here with you. You know I ought not to be here. I promised mamma——" she checked herself, then added, "Be quick, for I know I shall get scolded if mamma misses me. She fusses so."

"Does she?" he asked, absently, as if he had caught only the sweetness of her voice without the meaning of the words it spoke. "You must not be scolded or hurt because of me—you must never have any pain through me, you little white Rose! Not a petal must be crumpled through carelessness of mine."

He waited, looking yearningly at her. Had his anguish, expressed in eyes, and face, and voice, with a mute appeal beyond all words, touched her? No! The light nature could not respond.

She went on trivially: "Oh, I don't mind much, only mamma says I am always doing what I ought not to do—and *you* know whose fault

that is, Dick!" and she looked up at him again, and then put her sunny head down on his arm. "I shall get a scolding for hiding away like this."

"Hiding? *Are* we hidden?" He looked back over his shoulder and all round them as he led her down a narrow side path where the big blooming oleanders filled the air with their rich heavy perfume. "Yes," he answered to himself, "quite hidden, quite alone. You and I together—you and I, Rose, little white Rose, little sweetheart!"

He paused, and looked long down at her sweet flushed face and big childish eyes, clear and limpid as shallow water, and as soulless. Then he took her hands and held them tightly. He was silent again. He could not speak. The struggle within him was raging too furiously as yet. He had never before denied himself anything he had wanted—that letter lying above his heart would have borne testimony to that—why should he deny himself now this one brief glimpse of Heaven because hell was opening at his feet? He dropped her hands and took her into his arms, pressing her convulsively to his wildly beating heart, ruthlessly crushing the flowers and lace of her bodice.

"I love you! I love you!" broke at last hoarsely from him. "That is all I have to tell you, and you know it without the telling. I love you—oh, my darling, how I love you!"

“Do you, Dick, dear Dick ! And I love you,” was the gentle response, in tones unstirred by passion, albeit a trifle breathless from his close embrace.

He scarcely seemed to hear her; his eyes were searching her face as if he would drink its every feature into his soul. He put one arm around her neck and drew her head down on to his breast. But between her soft warm cheek and his heart lay that letter—those few short lines written tersely and in haste as if each word had been measured out of the writer's suffering. Many words had not been needed; those few were as the flaming sword of the destroying Angel of bliss, and as powerful to drive him forth from his Paradise ere he had entered into possession of it.

But at the moment he forgot all as he held her strained to him and tasted the sweetness of those maddening lips. Kiss after kiss he took with a feverish hunger that startled her, and made her try to move her face from its close imprisonment. Ah, she did not know then that he was laying up a store to last him through the lonely, loveless years before him—garnering a quick harvest to meet the famine of the joyless winter that even now was shedding its blighting influence over this early summer of his life.

How could she guess the despairing passion of the heart which beat with such laboured throbs beneath her head, when she had only

seen him as the gayest of the gay, at dance, or meet, or picnic, ever foremost with his help and frolic, the chief leader in every sport of the Gymkhana or bit of fun in the regiment?

Once that evening he had thought of telling her his secret. The imagination of what her sympathy would be had intoxicated him and nearly overruled his better judgment. Then his deep love for her had checked him. No, not to-night, he had decided. She looked so young, so innocent, his uncrushed white rose, he could not bear to cloud her joy. To-morrow—the next day—ah, Heaven, there would be plenty of days to speak of trouble—to-night it was “Begone, dull care!” And so he had danced, and laughed, and chatted with everyone, his exuberant spirits calling forth wondering remarks now and then. Guy Mackenzie, meeting him once, had stared at him, then taken his arm for a moment.

“Hallo, old fellow!” Urquhart had greeted him with. “How are you getting on? The fandango doesn’t hang fire, does it?” And he burst into a forced uproarious laugh.

“Urquhart, for Heaven’s sake, calm yourself. You will be in a fever by morning, if you don’t look out!”

“Ha, ha! Plenty of time to cool down later on! Now, it’s ‘on with the dance’ and all that sort of thing.” His eyes were watching one figure as it flitted gaily by in the arms of a portly

ruddy-countenanced old Colonel. He reeled suddenly, and an ashy hue spread over his face. With a quick movement he recovered himself and turned away from his comrade's concerned gaze.

Again now his resolution was shaken. Oh, to hear her words of love and pity, to see her eyes soften and fill with tears *for him!*

"There!" he gasped at last, pushing her from him. Her hair had become entangled in the silver chain of his signal whistle across his chest, and she shook her head to free herself, and then put up her hands to smooth her ruffled locks and pull out her furbelows about her dress. "Thank God for that! Whatever happens, no one can take those kisses from me, no other man can be the first to taste the freshness of that mouth! I *am* the first?" he demanded with sudden jealousy, seizing her again. "Swear that you love no other fellow, that you never have loved, that you never will love——" He broke off, and his encircling arms fell heavily to his side. No, he had no right now to finish that sentence, he had no hold upon her future. Well, the past was his—the present was his too—and the future—who dare count on the future?

"You frighten me, Dick," she gasped; "let me go. Please take me back now to mamma."

She was, as she said, frightened. She did not understand this vehement mood; he had never

been like it before, and her inexperience could not comprehend the tempestuous turbulence of a man's passion at its flood-tide. Now, as the dawn grew clearer, she could see his face, and she was dismayed at its appearance, at the despair and misery stamped there in lines which would never more fade away. She shrank back from her first insight into the depths of another's lacerated soul. She was only a girl, with neither a woman's courage to gauge that suffering, nor the strength of a woman's love, at its fullest and purest, to share and so mitigate it.

"Go—must you go? I had something more to tell you—but perhaps to-morrow—another time," putting off the dread moment of full knowledge. Perhaps it was being borne in upon him that she would fail him, and that supreme touch of agony he shrank from cowardly to-night.

"Yes, Dick, another day," she assented eagerly, and as she glanced up into his haggard face and wild eyes a cruel suspicion crossed her mind. Had the heat of the evening tempted him to relieve his thirst "not wisely but too well"? "Let us go back now," she said with gentle insistence. "I *must* go, please, Dick."

"Just one moment more, darling. It is not long we have been together, you and I; and think of all the ages in the future, when, when—— Oh! my little sweetheart, my one dear, dear love, what shall I do if——"

He put his hands on her shoulders and looked down solemnly at her.

"Rose, if you knew, if someone told you that something had happened, something you and I had never thought of, and you heard that I was poor, nothing but my pay left, would you love me still, would you be true to me? You *do* love me now, darling?"

"Of course, Dick, I love you, but why think of anything so horrible as being poor?"

"Would it be very horrible, dear, if shared with someone who loved you so truly, so passionately, that such love would wrap you all round and keep you happy despite that 'horrible being poor'?"

"Oh! Dick, don't let us even talk about it. Why need we, when such a thing won't happen?"

But she glanced at him with a half suspicion showing on her face.

Somehow a change had come over her. He noticed it instantly, and it chilled him like a sudden douche of ice-cold water. He saw her lips move, he almost caught the words they were forming. "A subaltern's buggy!" That was the idea formed instantly in her mind. No, she could not face that; no amount of love could make a one-horsed buggy comfortable.

He sighed, and with that sigh the bitterness of death itself was lived through.

"Well, my little one, I won't persecute you any longer. I said you must never, never know

the least trouble through me, and you shall not. I want to ask you just one last favour. Will you give me one kiss, just one?"

"Oh, Dick, when you have had more than I dare count already," she said reproachfully, and blushed beautifully as she touched his chain in a shy, caressing way. "And it's quite, quite daylight now. Oh! I could not—no really," she added hurriedly, as she saw the hunger of his eyes deepening into fierceness.

"I gave *you* those kisses; now I want *you* to give me one, just once to put your dear little white arms round my neck, and give me one kiss, only one, all of your own accord. I will never ask you for another."

His tone was solemn to sadness.

She laughed, and said lightly, not being able to fall in with these bewildering chameleon moods of his, "Why, Dick, you speak as if you were at your own funeral! No, no; no more kisses for a long, long time. I don't know what mamma will say. I must go. Come!"

And she turned to walk back up the path.

A spasm crossed the man's face, and the last gleam of light died out of it. His sun had set just as the eternal sun was rising on the new-born day. He saw something lying where she had a moment before stood. It was one of her gloves, crushed and soiled. Nevertheless, he picked up the small "waif of the ball" and thrust it into the breast of his tunic, and then

he followed her back into the now rapidly emptying mess-room.

Mrs. Yorke was there, a decidedly cross expression on her handsome face and a sharp reprimand on her lips. But the words were never uttered. If ever heart-breaking despair were stamped on human features she read it there in Dick Urquhart's face, in the dark misery of the eyes and in the grey pallor of the fine large mouth. Urquhart accompanied the ladies out to their carriage, for the General had vanished, preferring to stroll home and smoke.

"You have been dancing too much, Mr. Urquhart," said Mrs. Yorke, her heart smiting her as she looked out through the window at the young man. There was a touch of almost maternal solicitude in her voice. Memories of the past were stirring again within her. "You have been too gay lately; you want a rest."

"Yes, Mrs. Yorke, that is it. I have been too gay. But never mind, that is past. I will not be gay in the future. I mean to turn over a new leaf, like the good little copy-book boys, and become a sensible, sober—— Ah, Miss Rose, I am clumsily fastening your cloak in the door." He opened it again, and then shut it with a sharp click, and stood back, bareheaded and very upright, in the morning mist.

The girl leaned forward, and a little white hand appeared through the window for a farewell wave. At that moment their eyes met.

His very soul looked into hers—looked with despairing, yearning passion—looked, and with the look awoke it into life—too late!

She did not know what had happened; she only felt the inexplicable, uncontrollable heaven-sent spark that at that look burst into life and awoke her slumbering heart.

“Dick!” she gasped.

But—the horses started, she was bowled away from his sight. Alas, alas! for poor humanity!

“Mamma, oh, mamma!”

The words broke with a wail from her as she turned and buried her face on her mother's shoulder.

“I know, dear, I know! My poor little girl!”

Urquhart watched the carriage until it faded, a black speck in the distance; then he turned sharply on his heel, crunching the dust and gravel with a hard grind.

“That is over, and I have not made a fool of myself! Nothing more can matter now. The fandango is ended, the burial over. What will the next life bring?”

CHAPTER IV.

URQUHART crossed the verandah and entered the ball-room. His footsteps sounded loud and hollow on the wooden boards of the deserted place. The last of the pleasure-seekers had departed, and only a few silent-footed men stole about extinguishing the remaining lights in the lanterns and searching for any flotsam and jetsam they might chance to come across. The floor was strewn with scraps of torn lace, curling snakes of ribbon, here and there crushed dying flowers, a stray handkerchief, a glove. Urquhart stood moodily in the centre and looked round upon it all. He was—

“Like one who treads alone some banquet-hall deserted,
Whose guests are fled, whose garlands dead, and all but
him departed.”

The end of the season—the end of his career! Well, every dog has his day. God knows his had been a happy one, if short!

What would they all say when they knew? They would be sorry; everyone had been so good to him always. His conceit was too small

to let him put it correctly ; he had been such a favourite. He could hear them talking about him among themselves ; he could fancy Mackenzie's loud hearty voice lowered ; he could see the stern piercing eyes of his chief softening as they told him that Urquhart had—— What ! Great God ! What horrible thought had taken possession of his mind ?

The airless room was stifling him. He would choke. He strode out again into the verandah, and leaned against one of the creeper-swathed pillars, putting up his hand to loosen his collar-band. His misery-filled eyes stared unseeingly out on the thick mist. A noiseless dark figure stole softly by him, but he heeded it not, though the man looked almost wistfully at the young altered face, for Urquhart had been as popular with servants as with comrades, and the coolie saw something was wrong with "the Sahib," but he did not dare to express his fears out loud, and, passing on, vanished in the fog. The lonely figure had not moved, the haggard countenance had still that awful look upon it, as if it were confronted by some horror from an unseen world.

Flopping along out of the ball-room and down the verandah came a small black object—a stray olive-branch from the servants' quarters. The scrap of humanity scuffled rapidly towards him on its knees and one hand, while the other hand tightly clutched something in its chubby

fist. It stopped and gaped wonderingly at the young soldier's feet, then laid its grimy fingers on the shiny boots. At first Urquhart did not move, not even feeling the touch, but suddenly a quiver broke up the frigidity of his face, and he came back to the realities with a start as if he had been shot. In those few moments he had been standing face to face with the insoluble mystery of Death. He staggered, grabbed at the pillar to steady himself, and looked down.

Good Heavens! Was that all? Was *that* the cause of the violent plunge he had taken from the borderland of the Great Unknown back to the Matter-of-Fact of life?

A small bronze baby staring up at him with beady black eyes and long tongue lolling out between thick lips and gleaming teeth, the while one hand curiously raised his trouser hem as the other busily prodded his ankle with—what? A hairpin! A harmless, unromantic, everyday hairpin, dropped from the dance-loosened tresses of some fair visitor. Evidently the youthful scavenger had been attracted by the novelty, and had pounced upon it to swell his motley collection. The young fellow suddenly burst into a roar of laughter, so loud, so long, that he had at last to lean weakly against the post, too much spent to even continue his cachinations.

“Confound you, you black imp; what are

you doing here?" he asked, stooping to rub his tingling foot. He was overcome with almost hysterical mirth again as he raised the wee creature to a standing posture, and saw the fantastic drapery of a flowing blue ribbon twisted round the naked body, and a few dead flowers coquettishly stuck among the frowsy curls of its head.

Oh, mighty shades of Melpomene and Thalia, how near in touch ye are! Is there but so thin a division between soul-inspiring tragedy and mirth-provoking comedy? To be driven by a woman to the very edge of the precipice of self-destruction; to have looked down its sheer obscurity into its unfathomable yet alluring depths, only to be dragged, nay, prodded back by so essentially a woman's attribute—a hairpin!

Enough! Common-sense prevailed. Dick Urquhart was saved. He stood up, gently pushed the ebon specimen of humanity aside, and strode off to his bungalow. He had been wasting the precious moments in a mad dream when there was so much to be done and so little time in which to do it. One life to be wound up and another to be started before the sun had penetrated the mist, else was he lost. He shuddered a little as he entered the room, and his eyes fell on the letters still lying on the table as he had left them. They must be answered, destroyed. He threw off his heavy

tunic, and then sat down to write—just a few lines to cut himself adrift from those who held him dear. Thank God, to-day there was no mother's heart to be broken by the news! Urquhart was never a letter-writer at any time. The weekly mail had always been a more tedious duty to him than the stiffest drill. This tax upon his powers of composition was the last he would have for many a month.

“It may be for years, it may be for ever!”

He took the first sheet of paper that tumbled out of his case as he shook it, sprawled his long legs out under the table, and began,

“DEAR DAD,

“I am not going to disgrace you. You have done quite right not to stint the girls' fortunes for me. Don't fuss about me nor spend money making enquiries. My sort always turn up when least expected. Rest assured I shall never disgrace your name nor bring discredit on the dear old regiment. The sale of my things and commission will about clear my debts. I can say good-bye to all as a man of honour and a gentleman. My love to the girls, and tell them not to fret. Whatever the future may bring I shall always try to remember that I am

“Your son,

“DICK.”

A great splash blurred the signature and the curly head fell forward on to the crossed arms.

But this would never do! He nerved himself afresh, directed and sealed the envelope, wrote a short account of his debts, and gave directions about the sale of his possessions to his chum, Mackenzie, and then went into his bedroom to change his clothes. He came out again shortly clad in a khaki shooting suit, the Norfolk jacket confined by an ammunition belt, and the knickerbockers met by puttoo bandages. He put down the thick boots he was carrying and stole softly across the floor to Mackenzie's room. He did not mean to disturb him, "the fellow must be done up with last night's exertions," he thought, he would only take a silent farewell of the jovial face of his comrade who had shared his brief military career from start to finish. He drew off a queerly carved old gold ring he habitually wore and put it on the dressing-table among the odds and ends lying there, then quitted the room.

For some minutes he stood in the centre of the sitting-room looking hesitatingly at his splendid stock of guns, one of his many extravagances. Deciding, however, that any of them might be more impeding than useful, he discarded the idea of taking one, selecting instead a very practical looking revolver. He filled his ammunition belt with cartridges and his flask with brandy. Then he took up his sword—his bright unbaptized sword. A troubled look came into his blue eyes and his whole

face quivered. Memory, cruel memory, that delights to give us moments of needless torture, had carried him back to the day he had gone with his father to buy his sword, not ordered in the usual heedless fashion through his tailor, but carefully selected at Wilkinson's. Even now he felt the thrill of that proud moment when he had flourished it from its scabbard. He remembered how the usually light-natured old man had spoken to him with such sudden gravity, putting before him in brief words his duty as a soldier and a gentleman, reminding him of the old distich of duelling days :

“ Draw me not without cause,
Sheath me not without honour.”

Boy-like, he had felt then that he could go forth to fight a world of foes if needs be. And this was the summit of those aspirations, a broken career, a wasted life, a sun set before it had reached even its meridian. He was unmanning himself with thoughts like these. He laid the sword back on the table with a short sigh, slipped into his heavy boots, gave a last glance all round, and walked on to the verandah.

Ah ! A groan broke from him. Not yet was he free, not yet escaped, one more hampering heart-string yet to break, and this was being hardly wrung now. With one ear cocked up, watchful eyes alert, and sturdy body all a-quiver, stood his dog, a white fox-terrier of the

most ordinary type with a rakish splash of black round one eye and a repetition of the same at the end of his stump of a tail, as if the painter of his coat had wiped his brush there after that adornment of the left cheek.

"Nipper" had heard the unusual sounds of movement in his master's quarters and was worked up to a state of simmering frenzy, ready at a second's notice to boil over into mad exuberance at the prospect of some unanticipated excitement. The dog bounced upon Urquhart, snapping at his hand, caressing his feet, and telling by every means in his power short of actual speech that he was prepared for anything, from a quiet stroll through the uninviting morning fog to a hot and thirsty run of hours' duration, anything at all so long as he was with his master. This unreckoned-for encounter with his faithful friend was a bitter pang. Urquhart sat down on the step of the verandah, took the quivering morsel of incarnate devotion into his arms, and laid his head down on the shiny coat. Something hot fell on it presently, and the dog started and wriggled himself free so as to stare up at this new kind of master with almost human eyes of sympathy. There was something very wrong here, his cute dog-nature detected that at once. Where were the cheery voice and teasing chaff with which he had hitherto been greeted? "Nipper" did not understand, and could ask no troublesome ques-

tions, could only mutely wait and watch the beloved face.

At that moment, face to face with that unflinching gaze, Urquhart was having it borne in upon him what the enormity of that past folly of his had been, and a wave of remorse swept over him, well-nigh swamping all courage or power of endurance. What misery his reckless devilry would inflict upon others besides himself—even to a dog! Who could tell what desolating grief the poor little beast would go through as he watched day after day for the idolised master who would never return? His eyes were growing stupidly misty again, too dim to see those brown ones staring unblinkingly at him, and he made a desperate effort to string himself up. There could be no drawing back now; already had he reached the banks of the Rubicon, and its chill waters were wetting his feet. To retrace his steps would be worse folly than to go on.

“No, Nipper, old boy, not this time! not this time! You can’t come with me to-day, Nip.”

He shook his head mournfully as he spoke, and the dog understood every word. His small stump ceased its agitated jerkings, the body grew limp and dejected, and a fawning miserable expression came into the pleading eyes.

“Great Scott! it’s hard. If I had only been as true as you, faithful little beast, there would have been no need of *this!*”

He stole back into the quiet room, took his sword-belt off the table where he had flung it down, came out, and laid it on the verandah floor.

"There, Nip, guard, old chap!"

The dog heard his sentence. He planted his paws across the strap, but he could not stifle the low howl of indignation and acute disappointment at this cruel, most unusual treatment. How they haunted the exile in the lonely years, those wistful brown eyes, telling of a love more true, more staunch than the human love he had craved for and failed to win! Dogism knows no reason, it only loves. Beggar or prince makes no difference, money counts not with it. When human love reaches the sublime depth of a dog's unquestioning faithfulness, then will it be perfected.

"Nipper" was the last bit of home, of England, Urquhart saw as he plunged into "the mist of the morning, damp and gray." The old familiar landmarks shot past him as he ran, his head bent forward, and his breath coming quickly. From out the enshrouding veil the vague form of the Sikh sentry took dim shape, nothing distinct but the tuft of his turban. Urquhart was not on duty and did not know the countersign. He doubled over to avoid the inconvenient rencontre and butted into another.

"Qui hi!" sounded the voice of the man on

guard. No answer. "Who com-me-der?" No reply.

Urquhart heard the rattle of the rifle brought to the present, dashed out his arm, and threw up the weapon. The ball sang harmlessly past him through the mist, and, putting on a desperate spurt, he was in a twinkling beyond the range of Sikh sentry or gun as the grey vapour mercifully enveloped him. On and on he ran, not knowing whither he went, not pausing to look, not caring as he followed the rough rock-strewn path, till want of breath at last brought him to a standstill. How far he had run or where he was he had no idea. All he knew, all he cared for, he was away, away beyond the reach of those "cursed wolves," freed from the haunting dread of disgrace. The old life lay there far away behind him; in that distant valley—the new?

At that moment the mist rolled away and the sun shone out bright and strong, gleaming on the rugged bare rocks around him. How desolate it was, how horribly lonely! A sudden terror seized him. What had he done? On every side rose those hard dark rocks, shutting him in, no touch of verdure to soften them—emblem of the life before him, stern, grinding, and untouched by gentler influence.

Alone! Would to Heaven he were! His eyes dilated and his face blanched. What was that behind that jagged boulder? The tuft of

a turban surely! And there, and there? All about him, on either side he saw the long guns of Afghan marauders, their barrels reduced to a point. There followed a horrible moment of utter stillness. He felt no fear after the first cold thrill, he had too much of the soldier's "Kismet" about him for that, though just for one beat's length his heart stood still. Then,

"He looked at the earth, he looked at the sky,
He looked at the files of musketry,"

and folded his arms across his breast. Resistance would be worse than useless, one step on his part and "forth would dart those tongues of flame." Evidently his resignation was taken for granted, for, one after another, tufted turbans, then heads, then whole bodies appeared, and he was presently surrounded by a small band of captors. One among them advanced towards him, apparently, from the superiority of his appearance, their captain. On came the tall, stalwart figure with that swinging gait which long mountaineering exercise alone can give, his aquiline features set off by the huge blue turban he wore, his limbs clad in nondescript garments of camel's hair, the wide pyjamas gathered fully in about his knees. A deadly-looking Afghan knife was stuck through his belt, and a long matchlock gun with curiously curved stock slung over his shoulder.

The young soldier stood immovable while those piercing dark eyes scanned him. His

own clear blue ones met them fully; not a tremor passed across his face when one of that rude band stepped forward and laid rough grasp on the revolver in his belt. But the captain put up his hand and said something sharply to the man, who fell back among his comrades. Urquhart's fearlessness had evidently made a favourable impression on their chief, who drew nearer to him, and addressing him in Hindostani, which savoured much of the Pushtoo dialect, he said:

"What would you here, unbeliever and spy that thou art, among the enemies of thy accursed white race?"

Urquhart flushed hotly under the opprobrious term, but choking down his choler, he replied quietly:

"You accuse me wrongfully. Judge no man until you know. Unbeliever I may be—that can affect no one but myself—spy! by my God, never! Take me to your chief, guard me if you will, though I give you my word of honour as a soldier and a sahib, that I will attempt no escape. I have come to be among you, not to wish to escape from you."

The Afghan looked at him with stern fixedness. Apparently his scrutiny satisfied him, for he said briefly:

"Follow me," and turning on his heel began to walk forward on the narrow tortuous path which led onwards up a steep incline.

One of the men hurried to the captain's side, and in low tones suggested that the prisoner should be made to proceed first. Who could tell that he would not treacherously stab his captor from behind with some weapon concealed about his person? But the Afghan smiled grimly. The trust which a Briton rarely fails to inspire had taken possession of him, and he paid no heed to the unnecessary warning beyond that smile and a further progress along the path.

Urquhart had caught many of the words, understood them, and marvelled not a little at the man's stupid suspicion, for so it seemed to him to be. He had yet to learn the depth of an Afghan's mistrustful nature. What would it avail him to murder in cold blood the only one of that antagonistic troop who had shown friendliness to him? He stumbled clumsily on, giddy from long fasting and nearly spent with fatigue. Nothing had passed his lips for many hours, and he had gone through emotions enough to last an ordinary lifetime. The sun poured down from overhead on the stony, uneven path, and his cap was but scant protection from the blinding, scorching rays. He envied the men their shielding turbans, and he put up his arm to pass his hand across his weary brow. It was instantly seized from behind in a grip of iron, and dragged down, while a rough voice growled over his shoulder :

"Spy, wouldst thou be assassin too?" And he felt the cold touch of a gun's muzzle at the back of his head, while a hand deftly slipped his revolver from its place in his belt.

But he was beyond caring much about anything, too callous now of what happened to him to trouble to explain, and for a moment he wished that the weapon would do its work and free him from it all. One sharp pang, scarce felt ere past, and the question of his fate would be decided for evermore. A fate perhaps better than the one he seemed likely to have to endure in the future, a life surrounded by distrust and enmity, nothing but scowls and insulting epithets to greet him, and cold steel touch at every slightest movement. Ah, well! how easy then it would be to bring the end! One suspicious action on his part, and a long Afghan knife or bit of lead would give him his release. He marvelled at himself—he who had loved life so keenly just for the mere pleasure of living, of feeling his young passionate heart throbbing healthily in unison with the great heart of Nature all about him, that he could suddenly look death, cold, pulseless death, so calmly in the face and not shudder nor quail at the prospect. A woman's ruthless hand had wrenched and broken the strings of his life's music, and he deemed the instrument irretrievably wrecked. Not so. Strings can be replaced, jarred instruments mended, and again music,

often sweeter, stronger, and truer than before, be brought forth under the magic of a sympathetic touch.

The Pass, which had widened into a glen where Urquhart had come across the Afghan band, now narrowed again into a mere rift between the great puddingstone rocks, along the edge of which they were creeping. Abrupt and almost perpendicular towered the hillsides, below them dashed the stream, whose course they appeared to be following, shallow or dried up in summer, now swollen with the melting snows to a fierce torrent. The path was irregular, a mere foothold along the edge of the huge overhanging boulders. Here and there a cleft occurred, impassable to all but mountain-trained aborigines—just the spot for marauders to lurk to shoot down the defenceless traveller through the gorge. The place was made for plunder, murder, atrocities of every kind. From above, how easy to roll down the loosened masses of rock from the high precipices while watching sentries commanded every opened vein in the unscaleable sides to fire on an enemy striving to force its way through.

Urquhart found himself musing on it all from a military point of view, recalling stories of the horrors which had been perpetrated in those impassable gorges on the "brave hearts and true" who had gone forward at the word of command, "not to question why, only to do

and die." Here the cliffs above seemed to meet altogether, and a cool damp air swept past him like a revivifying elixir; the waving line they were following turned abruptly round a sharp corner and descended rapidly to a picturesque glen. The song of the waters as they dashed along over their pebbly bed greeted them, and on the green turf beside the stream a short halt was made for the evening repast.

Spent now to complete exhaustion, Urquhart flung himself on the grass, stretched out his long limbs with a deep sigh, and folded his arms under his head as a pillow. It was many, many hours since he had tasted anything, and then—Back flew his traitorous thoughts to that cool, dark corner in the verandah where he had sat with "her," his White Rose, laughing over ices and macaroons. He had not eaten his; his ice had melted on the plate while he had been feasting his eyes on the dainty face and form beside him. The fretting flow of the stream near by sounded like some soothing strain of music—the band behind in the ball-room discoursing a dreamy valse—it grew louder—it was in his head—he was wet—it was rushing over him! Was he drowning? How—— Was *this* Death?

He struggled, threw out his arms, and was conscious of the dark face with the blue turban bending over him. His face was wet, his lips damp with some fiery liquid, he tried to rise,

but fell back, and his eyes closed again. For the first time in his life he had fainted. A hand, hard and bony, was moving with touch gentle as a woman's about him, loosening the coat and belt, bathing his temples, moistening his lips.

"It's all right, old chap," he feebly said, his thoughts running on his old comrade, "give us a hand up. Gad! but my head feels qucer!"

He opened his eyes and started back into full bewildered consciousness. Ah! there was no Mackenzie here—no friendly chum with cheery voice and reassuring smile, only that apparently unsympathetic glance from out the strange thin visage. Yet the eyes were kindly, even pitiful, as he searched them. The Afghan passed one arm round the young fellow's shoulder and raised him to a sitting posture, propping his back with his knee.

Urquhart's sense had now fully returned to him, and slowly, for his vocabulary of the Push-too dialect was limited, he explained that it was only the heat and hunger. The captain nodded his comprehension, and, looking back over his shoulder, made a sign to one of his men. In a short space of time Urquhart was doing ample justice to the simple fare offered him, and taking long refreshing draughts out of a quaint leathern vessel. It was a unique meal, different from any he had ever taken before. The Afghan asked no questions, Urquhart vouchsafed no remarks. But his spirits felt wonderfully

plucked up, strength and hope of life had returned as the food sent his young blood coursing swiftly through his veins again. It was with a delightful sense of ease he sat and puffed at his pipe until he heard the order given for the continued march. He buttoned up his coat, buckled to his belt, and then noticed with surprise that his revolver had been returned to him and lay on the grass beside him. He glanced from it to the wearer of the blue turban, unable to keep the astonishment out of his expression.

"The Sahib is no spy," said the Afghan briefly, "his honour is as mine."

Urquhart looked at him, and a lump rose in his throat, making speech for the moment impossible. He involuntarily extended his hand. The stranger made no advance, he was unfamiliar with the Feringhee mode of exhibiting feeling, and the hand-shake, sign-manual of fealty (would it always were!), did not pass between them. Nevertheless, from that hour forward, Urquhart had a staunch friend in Serafrauz, the lawless Afghan warrior.

On and on they went, past wild, fertile glens, where the setting sun turned to gold the tender greenery of the new foliage, and the mountain stream, swollen to a torrent, tossed and foamed through narrow defiles with overhanging precipices and dreary utter barrenness, until the path began to slope steadily upwards and became less dangerous to the foothold, finally taking the

form of a beaten track, rough still, but easy walking after that already traversed. They were ascending the gradual incline of a very steep hill. Crowning the eminence could be seen the outline of a fort, and behind it peeped houses ; evidently a small village clustered round its base at the back, thus receiving protection from invasion. On either side the mountain sloped steeply away ; the fort stood out clearly against the sky like the finishing peak to the rocky height.

Urquhart watched it growing gradually nearer as he clambered on with a curious medley of feelings working within him, wondering vaguely what lay in store for him behind those brown, sun-dried brick walls. Great towers, built for defence, not for ornament, flanked each angle. From one of them boomed forth the sonorous question, " Who comes ? " from the mouth of a long jezail, and the answer was returned from the captain's matchlock. Then the ponderous gates were opened and they passed under the deep archway into the tower itself.

The inhabitants, warned by the exchange of shots, that somebody or something out of the ordinary had entered Khelat, came out to meet the arrival. They greeted with undisguised stares of wonder the white-faced Feringhee in the centre of the band of soldiers, and looks of compassion met him from dark eyes between the folds of women's veils. After the delicate

women of the plains he had grown accustomed to, the tall erect carriage and free movements of these robust figures drew his attention, and the looks of pity were returned by those of frank admiration. But what did those commiserating glances mean? Had he passed over a Bridge of Sighs into a Prison of Despair? Did they know that he was walking to his doom, some hideous death perchance by torture? Those vicious-looking knives looked as if they could do such work well. He had escaped with his life into the Khyber, it was true—yes, so far, but was he through? He might yet have to experience that better for him had it been if his body had been left in one of those narrow mountain gorges, a prey to the wandering wolf and hyena.

He was swiftly conducted round by a side way to the huge central keep at the gate. The outside looked formidable and uninviting. Here the Khan held early morning durbar to meet his subordinates, to issue orders for the day, to hear all complaints, and to settle matters of small moment. This he had power to do. All large issues had to be referred to his Jeerga, a kind of council formed of the heads of the principal families.

The durbar was long since over and the large audience hall was practically empty. All round ran massive pillars supporting a second storey, which was a kind of "Ladies' Gallery." This

was screened by a fretwork of elaborately carved fragrant wood, through which the bright curious eyes could see, themselves being hidden, all that was going on below. There is freer intercourse between the sexes in Afghanistan than almost anywhere among the Orientals, and the women are far less rigorously excluded from all publicity. This gallery had frequent visitants. In the right gallery at the end near the seat of justice, the lattice was made to open. This marked the private corner frequented by the chief's favourite and only daughter, Zorayda. From here she could catch the tones of her father's voice, and to her he could look up for a glimpse of the beloved form as she occasionally peeped out to nod and smile and wave a small brown hand.

Even now, as the young soldier entered between his guard, had he raised his eyes to the screen above him, he might have seen the flutter of white draperies, and heard the jingle of armlets and the whisper of soft voices. But his gaze was concentrated on the farther end facing the entrance, where, on a low divan under a Moorish horseshoe arch between two pillars of more imposing form and decoration than the others, sat the chief, smoking his hookah and drowsily reclining among his cushions, his air of authority set aside and his magisterial mien relaxed. Round about, in attendance, stood a few of the guard, fierce

stalwart hillmen, chosen for their size and intrepidity.

The steady tramp of feet up the long stone floor aroused the old man from his half dreamy reverie. He sat up to find before him the captain with his charge. The men accompanying him fell into the background behind the guard, and Urquhart stood at last before the arbiter of his fate. There was something irresistibly refined about the whole bearing and countenance of the aged Afghan which reassured the young Englishman. He might have been a descendant of the Beni-Israel, those missing "lost" tribes, for his face was the noblest type of Hebrew with a softening touch of Greek about the profile, gained perhaps by the mingling of his Jewish ancestors with the remnants of Alexander's army where it entered India at that North-west corner.

The old chief betrayed not the least flicker of surprise at this strange unexpected appearance of a Feringhee in their midst, but from under his shaggy grey brows he studied with slow caution the new-comer waiting there before him for his sentence. Urquhart stood erect and met his scrutiny with an unflinching gaze, while the captain quickly explained how and where he had come by his prisoner. Urquhart could only understand a sentence here and there of the rapid abbreviated jargon of Push-too, but from the expression on the captain's

face he knew he was speaking without prejudice, reporting favourably of him.

When he had ended, the Khan waved him aside and said to Urquhart, "Approach, young man, and explain thy rash presumption in daring to enter alone the land of thine enemy. Art thou sent as a spy? That were useless—no man can hope to escape from here alive. We show scant mercy to such as thou!" and he significantly touched the glittering handle of his knife where it peeped through the folds of his cummerbund.

Again the Englishman's fair face crimsoned with sudden indignation. His pride revolted at the hated term; yet, knowing there was ample reason for suspicion, he let discretion rule him, and he merely said:

"Chief, if I am the spy you think me, kill me. I do not hold my life at a grain of sand's worth; but my people do not send spies,—they need none!" he added, proudly. "I am here alone; unknown to any I left my home to seek a grave or a place among you. Do with me as you think fit. I am in your hands—you can take my life, you can spare it. Only—let me die as a soldier, not as—as a spy!"

Urquhart's bearing and frank speech carried conviction with it. The chief thoughtfully stroked his long white beard as he listened to the slow sentences formed from a limited vocabulary and pronounced with unfamiliar

accent. But he feigned a doubt he did not feel.

"Bravely spoken, Feringhee, and as befits a man and a soldier!" was his reply. This unflinching, desperate front appealed to his philosophy. "But how can I tell thou dost speak the truth? How know thou wilt not do the work thou mayst have been sent upon and then escape? We want no troublesome prisoner here to watch and guard—death is the surest and safest way to deal with the Feringhee."

There was a faint rattle as the jalousies overhead slightly opened, the glimpse of a small brown hand, and the chief heard the tinkle of bracelets. He glanced up, and his face slowly softened at what he evidently saw. There was a perceptible pause before he spoke again, during which Urquhart unagitatedly waited, so little did it seem to touch him which way the scales of his fate should turn. The Khan's voice, however, betrayed a new gentleness in its tone when he spoke again.

"Feringhee," he said, "thy life is in thine own hands. Deal with me truly and I will meet thee in the same spirit. Explain to me thy presence here, and what thou seekest. The same honour thou dost mete to me shall be meted out to thee."

Urquhart drew himself up, and a proud flash came into his blue eyes.

"Khan," he said, "I am a soldier as thou art.

Thou hast won success—no man dare question thy honour. *I* have failed to win that success as yet, therefore must I the more ardently strive to keep my honour. I am homeless, a wanderer on the earth. I have lost everything. I stand before thee to-day stripped of all that makes life worth having. When I came through yon dark pass I brought nothing with me but honour and a strong hand and heart to defend it. I am here to-day to offer thee that hand and heart for the upholding of *thy* honour. So may I prove the staunchness of my own. All I ask is that thou wilt not require me to bear arms against my own people. In all other warfare I will fight for thee as a soldier should."

The Ahmed Khan started. Such demeanour was, to say the least of it, unexpected; such dauntlessness unusual even amongst that fearless tribe of fatalists. The simple words rang true, and the young face was open and manly despite the weary, bitter expression in the blue eyes and round the firm wide mouth.

"My honour! I need none to defend *that*," was the haughty reply; "least of all a Feringhee and an unbeliever."

"No man can have too many to defend so fickle and frail a mistress—a mistress who lives or dies by a breath!" was the quick response. "I would be thy soldier to fight for thee. I am a soldier of England, trained and expert, but—but——" he stopped abruptly.

"Go on, young man," was the brief command.

"I got into debt ; I owed all I possessed. I have given up that all to pay those debts, and to-day I am as I stand before thee. I will work to maintain the life thou hast spared to me ; or, if needs be, I can prove by death that an English soldier knows how to die. And, God knows !" he added, in his own language, half to himself, "which is the harder to face to-day—life or death."

Again the fretted screen shook and rattled, and again the small brown hand appeared.

"It is enough," said the chief, after a pause of profound thought. "I will be responsible for thee. As thou hast said, I will trust my honour to thee in giving my word as bond for thine. Do not betray me, or—by Allah !" and the deep-set eyes gleamed from their shaggy penthouse like coals of living fire ; "ten thousand tortures will not suffice to punish thee, Feringhee !"

The Khan rose. "The Feringhee is *my* prisoner," he said, turning to the captain. "I will be hostage for him. The day he escapes I will answer for him to the Ameer." And as he spoke he fixed the young soldier with his eagle eye. "Let no man touch him at his peril." He waved a hand of dismissal. "Thou canst go." To Urquhart he added, "Follow me !"

The majestic form of the old man led the way through the arch to the right. Again he looked

up as he passed under the gallery, and Urquhart, seeing the movement, lifted his eyes, too. They were met by a pair of soft, liquid ones, heavily fringed by long dark lashes, their depth and beauty enhanced by the white cloud-like veil floating about them. Then he passed on in the wake of the chief, little guessing the defender that upward glance had gained him in the new life he was about to begin.

CHAPTER V.

THE young Englishman who had so remarkably appeared in Khelat vanished again, incarcerated until the Khan had called together a Jeerga, and with them consulted on the future treatment of this trespasser on their mercy. The verdict at first was unanimous—death. By such was safety without doubt secured. Better be sure than repentant, they all agreed. But the chief overruled them by the power of his rugged will and the high reputation he bore among them. At last, by offering himself as bond for the good faith of his captive, he won the life he sought, and obtained consent to enrol the Feringhee in his body-guard.

When next Urquhart made his appearance he had donned the loose suitable garments of the Afghan soldier, thereby adding apparently nearly a foot in height to the lithe graceful figure which they showed off to great advantage. The blue turban deftly twisted round the peaked scarlet cap, suited to perfection the clear colouring of the winning face, and accen-

tuated the almost vivid blue of the eyes, and their owner found the repeated and undisguised interest "the Feringhee Sahib" attracted at first decidedly embarrassing. But his lack of self-consciousness helped him speedily to forget such trivial discomfort, and he applied himself assiduously to the mastering of his new duties. Only by incessant occupation could forgetfulness be hoped for—at present his heart was one dull ache from the ceaseless and awful "Heimweh" which seized upon him. There is no more intolerable pain to endure than that craving for the country of one's birth, and not the least part of the suffering is the knowledge that there is only one panacea and that is beyond reach. Urquhart strove against it might and main, crushing down all thought of the past under the immediate pressure of the present, allowing himself not one instant's respite from his work.

His gift of tongues stood him in good stead now, and every spare moment was spent in studying the daily idioms of the Pushtoo dialect, listening to the gossip of the bazaars, the rude interchange of buffoonery between men, and even the chatter of the children. The wild lawless life was in keeping with the sporting instincts of his English nature, and he speedily won renown by the accuracy of his aim, and the easy way he would shoot a bird on the wing. The Afghans had never practised and seldom attempted to

fire at a flying object, and they were astounded at the swift certainty of Urquhart's shot. His skill with the revolver gained for him the sobriquet of "the man with six lives in his belt."

Some rough quarters had been allotted to him with the rest of the guard, and it was the coarseness of this enforced companionship which began to tell on his refined instincts and cultured breeding. The rough food, boorish manners, and general uncleanness of habits and speech of the wild hillmen shocked him at every turn. He lost flesh and spirits, and a silence, bordering on moroseness and utterly alien to his natural disposition, was growing on him, fostered by the dogged determination to bear all without a murmur.

The hot weather had set in and the small compactly-built and undrained town was unhealthy to the last degree. Urquhart volunteered for every excursion abroad that was organised for revenge or plunder. The most arduous marches, long tedious days spent in scouring the surrounding districts, when he slept in the open and lived on the scantiest fare, were preferable to the lonely close confinement of the narrow streets with their jabbering, ill-smelling inhabitants.

When not out he attended daily at the durbar, and it had become an established custom, though unadmitted even to himself, to glance up at that

right hand corner for the brief glimpse of a little brown hand, or the hasty flash from out those luminous eyes. The chief's daughter had displayed an unprecedented devotion to her father lately. Her careful duenna had observed it with mild curiosity, and speculated now and then upon the growing restlessness of the young girl when away from the gallery. But, as often happens until too late to arrest the mischief, she attributed it all to the wrong cause, and encouraged matters rather than put a check on them, thinking by so doing she was furthering her master's wishes, which she well knew.

As Zorayda sat with the Khan in the evening on the flat roof of the keep, she would question him about the Feringhee; but the old man did not notice the danger which this awakening interest in such an alien threatened, or he might have been more on the alert. As it was, he had more personal affairs lately to occupy his thoughts, and his vigilant notice of the young Englishman had slackened. After finding his trust in him was not likely to prove misplaced, he had left Urquhart much to himself, and turned his attention to these family matters demanding his attention.

Afzul, the next in command to Serafrauz, had lately become an aspirant to the hand of the Ahmed's daughter. For some time his advances had been marked; now he had spoken

to the Khan, praying his permission to make her his wife. Ahmed Khan had been startled. He had, with a way parents have, looked upon his daughter as still a young child—and here was she sought in marriage. The match would be a good one; Afzul's people ranked high, his father was the Shah Ferooz, and the young man himself had already displayed signal bravery and much military talent in the few tribal forays in which he had taken part. He was an eligible parti in every way. But the Ahmed was a doting parent, and placed his daughter's happiness before any social advancement, and so far Zorayda had shown no special liking for the young Afridi.

Father and daughter were, as usual, together one evening in their favourite solitude on the tower. The old man was peacefully smoking and ruminating, the girl leaning over the battlement gazing down the mountain side, watching the guard as they slowly wound up the steep rugged path, the rays of the setting sun touching into light and shade the rich blue of their turbans. The captain headed them; close behind him followed Afzul, his handsome swarthy features marred by the sullen scowl on his brow. A bitter jealousy of the Feringhee had lately sprung up in his breast, and the feeling was turning to unreasonable hate. And the hatred of the Afghan, as with all Orientals, is an ugly thing, "cruel as the grave," where

it only ends. He resented the growing popularity of the alien among the rough-hearted but often kindly hillmen, mainly due to the ease with which he had learned to excel them in their "nuzzi bazi" (native sports), hated him for having won the esteem and admiration he had himself failed to attract, although he was one of themselves and should have been in touch with them, and now, more dangerous than all to Urquhart's future safety, Afzul had found out he might prove a rival where no rivalry could be brooked. He, too, had seen those stealthily opened jealousies and those dark eyes peeping shyly forth, and he knew—cursed thought!—that they were not there for him.

Last of all in the train came the Feringhee, loitering wearily, solitarily, behind them all. The sun caught his face as he raised his head for a moment to glance round him. The full strong light revealed all of a sudden to the watching maiden on the tower top the marked attenuation of the clear-cut manly features. There were dark hollows round the fine sad eyes and about the temples, and the ruddy glow had died quite away from the sunken cheeks. Her father, who had risen, and was standing now beside her, to observe his guard pass in under the arched gateway, alluded to the young Afzul, praising his prowess and skill, keeping his eyes, sharpened now by paternal anxiety, on the beautiful mobile face which was

partially unveiled, ready to mark the faintest trace of emotion there.

But the girl listened indifferently, and at the end of the laudatory remarks, said, in an unmoved quiet voice :

“I like him not, father—trust him not too far.”

“Like him not, my Zorayda ! He is young, brave, handsome as Rustum, and he loves you—what more couldst thou wish ?” And resuming his seat, he drew her to him.

The girl gave a little shrug of distaste, took his hand, and tightened his encircling arm about her as she replied :

“Nay, but all that is naught, dear father, when I like him not. Art tired of thy little Star ? Wouldst thou send her to twinkle in another’s sky ? Ah, father, thy Zorayda is sad at thy thoughts.”

“Nay, nay, my child, but thou must marry soon,” and he clasped her fondly to him at the bare thought of the parting he knew must come. “I have been over dilatory about the matter, and Afzul is rich—far richer than poor Ahmed Khan, thy father. He can give thee bright jewels, costly raiment, and a castle all thine own away up on the hills, and another down in the gay Cabul for the winter time.”

But she twined her arms round his neck, pressed her curving lips on his bearded face, and shook her head. No answer did she vouch-

safe other than the reiterated, "I like him not."

"Hast thou seen another, my Morning Star, who has taken thy sweet fancy? Wilt thou not let thy old doting father share thy little heart?"

He fancied he felt a faint tremor pass over the soft clinging form, but the girl loosened her caressing clasp and drew the drooping folds of her diaphanous veil about her. The old chief pondered over that sudden revelation while his daughter leaned across the battlements once more.

"Father," she began, presently, "what wilt thou do with the Feringhee?"

"*Do*, my child? I have done. He is my soldier."

"Then thou hast bought him—canst thou bind him to thee?"

"No need to *bind*,—his own wisdom does that. He knows the day he attempts to escape is the day of his death."

"Ah, father, say not so!" and the young girl shivered and came and stood beside him. "What has he done that thou shouldst think of taking his life?"

"Nothing, nothing," he said, hastily, "nor do I wish to kill him. As I said, it all rests with him."

"Ill-fated Feringhee!" murmured the girl, sadly. Her father caught the words.

"Why 'ill-fated'?" he asked. "It has been well with him. He has been allowed his life—no kaffir before ever met with such treatment as that."

"But—but, father"—she laid one round soft arm about the broad gaunt shoulders, as she propped herself against him—"hast thou not observed him? He is not happy—he looks ill. As I saw him this evening coming back I saw the change"—more softly—"I have seen it these many days. He looks like that eagle, dost thou remember, that the Afzul once gave to me and chained to a tree — and, father," her voice dropping into mournful cadence, "that eagle died."

"Well, my child," was the calm reply of the philosophic student of Islamism, "all must die—man, and beast, and bird—and the Feringhee also, when his time comes, neither before nor after. But when hast thou observed all this? What hast thou been doing looking at the worthless alien, whom no one knows and for whom no one cares?" Again that almost imperceptible tremor of the slight figure. "Thou shouldst have been looking at the brave, handsome Afzul, one of thine own race, not at a pale-faced unbeliever who is naught to thee!"

"Afzul!" with impatient disdain. The girl moved back to the edge of the tower and stood there.

The sky was flooded with the crimson glory

of the setting sun. Its rays touched to red the white draperies of the motionless form, and shone on the small flower-like face as she slipped back her veil and raised her little head to catch the refreshing evening breeze.

Death! How far away cold death seemed in that golden beauty, so rich, and full, and strong in its rush of warmth and brilliancy. And yet—the sun would sink, the glory die from out the sky, and the warmth pass into the chill of black night—the death of a day.

Zorayda shivered again and drew her veil up about her;

CHAPTER VI.

Down the mountain slope to the south, out far beyond the town at the back of the citadel, was the burial-ground of Khelat. The spot had been chosen with taste. It was on a broad plateau, sheltered by tall precipitous rocks on one side and bounded by a mountain stream on the other. Thus, carefully tended by Nature herself, vegetation flourished there. Shady trees grew about it, lovely flowers twined round the rugged stone walls and sprang up everywhere among the scattered graves.

Urquhart had come across the quiet spot one day in a solitary ramble, and the place soon developed a fascination for the lonely stranger. But at the same time that it soothed his jarred sensibilities it gendered an unhealthy morbidity in his hitherto light-hearted character. As the long summer days grew hotter, and the cramped town thereby more unbearable, he would escape whenever he could to the comparative coolness and peace of that tranquil "God's Acre." There were no wrangling, jabbering voices here ; often

it was quite deserted; sometimes the gentle gliding forms of women in their pretty clinging garments would add picturesqueness and life to the solitary place.

He had discovered a secluded corner where he could sit and smoke and listen restfully to the low babble of the women's voices the while he meditated on everything in the heavens above and the earth beneath—everything but his own future prospects. He often plotted the rise or fall of nations, but he carefully abstained from giving one thought as to where he might be when those contemplated catastrophes occurred. He was too thoroughly impregnated with the "Carpe Diem" spirit ever to speculate far beyond the immediate present when it concerned himself individually. And there he would lie for hours. The monotonous murmur of the voices sounded pleasant and soothing to ears accustomed to cultured tones and refined speech, and here he could sit quite screened by some big shrubs and enjoy the *dolce far niente* of those stolen hours. No one knew where he went, not that there was anyone who cared sufficiently to trouble to find out if his movements had aroused curiosity, but had there been any person interested in his welfare they might have warned him that a cemetery is not the healthiest spot in the world to choose for long visitations.

Yes, there was someone! He little guessed how a pair of bright eyes had watched for many

days the lonely Feringhee as he sauntered down the slope to the graveyard and there vanished.

He was hidden away there one broiling noon-tide, when the centre of Khelat seemed indeed to be "a burning fiery furnace," staring out over the deep heat-misted valley to the distant mountains beyond, where the narrow gorges between them showed like black lines. Through there lay the life he had left, the merry, careless round of happy-go-lucky existence; and he was here, divided from it all by that dark Pass! Would he ever go through the Khyber again—back from Hell to Paradise? No! He had passed through those veritable gates of Death, and by the consequences he must abide. No Orpheus, nor Eurydice either, would ever risk soul and life to seek him! Well, even Hell might not last for ever, but hope for escape he had none, mere mitigation of his bodily evils was all he occasionally longed for. His honour bound him here, his escape might mean the death of his hostage. Fool, fool that he had been, headstrong, thoughtless, mad! He had sown the wind, now must he reap the whirlwind.

Phew! How hot it was! It would be more bearable, this harvest of his, if it were indeed a whirlwind instead of this heat-dancing air. Oh, for a "B. and S.!" His parched throat grew drier at the mere thought of it. He wished he could do as someone had suggested, take off his

flesh and sit in his bones. A skeleton existence would not be a bad arrangement at the present state of the temperature. Skeleton! Skeleton? What did that make him think of? Skeleton and mountain gorges! What had bones to do with mountains?—no, not that old story of dry bones, that was a valley, and these skeletons were connected with something other. Was his mind going too with his strength and all love of action? Those mountains which shut him in to this cauldron of burning, lonely, insufferable torture, they had somehow to do with the skeletons. Oh, for the touch of a sympathetic hand on his throbbing forehead—a woman's cool soft fingers to pass over his brow and soothe away those weary frowns. When would he touch a woman's hand again? Once, like a deluded idiot, he had thought that he had won one "to have and to hold" in his own firm grasp till death alone should take the one from the other. What a small scrap of velvet it had been, a mere rose leaf in his big "paw," that wee hand of his "White Rose." And yet it had proved strong enough to stab him to the heart. He put his hand into the breast of his loose folds, fumbled about, and drew out—a glove, crushed, soiled, worthless. Her glove! As crushed, soiled, and worthless as the love she had given and then taken away.

He flung himself down on the hard burnt-up soil, and the heat rushed over him in waves, up

through his tired nerveless limbs to his bursting head. Peshawur, Mooltan, and those other "cities of the plain" he knew had never equalled this. His eyes wandered back to the mountains; the dark line widened between them until he could see down the gloomy Pass. Something was coming through, white and moving! Great God! it was an army of skeletons—a skeleton chief at their head and skeleton horses to bear them onward! They vanished, the gorge closed, and he was on the parched Maidan watching a day-break parade. He was a child once more, his mother was beside him, her voice was sounding in his ears, as, from the store-house of her memory, she word-painted a picture to him. He listened to it all again, as he had listened to it a hundred times, with the throbbing pulses and excited tingling nerves it had been wont to rouse in those long-past childish days.

* "A gallant host was gathered that morning to pass before the Commander-in-Chief; the dust clouds rose as the troops moved towards the saluting point. Through its dun veil gleamed the bayonets of the Infantry battalions and the lance points and pennons of the Irregular Horse, headed by the Bombay Horse Artillery, their long blood-red plumes

* A well-attested fact that the first expeditionary force to Cabul had marched past as skeletons before the prophetic vision of a spectator.

floating from the crests of their tiger-skin helmets. The rattle and clank of the guns, like the war chariots of old, made music more martial than the slow march of the band as the troops began to file past the Union Jack, floating over the reviewing officer and his brilliant staff. Behind were drawn up the carriages of the ladies, for a last peep at the heroes of that memorable day. 'But why, in Heaven's name, are they playing the "Dead March"?' whispered a lady, with an anxious look to one of the aide-de-camps, who opened his eyes blankly at the question. 'It is the regimental slow march of the 44th you hear,' he assured her.

"No more was said, but a look of sudden horror crossed her white face. Her strained eyes saw the gunners go by, the officers' sword-points dropped — 'Eyes right!' and white skulls turned eyeless sockets upon her. They were skeletons on skeleton steeds; a marching vision of Ezekiel, and the dry bones rattled in unison with the trace-links. 'Look!' she gasped hoarsely to her companion. 'Merciful God, they are skeletons!' 'My dear, you are ill,' said the girl; but the lady stared fascinatedly on as the magnificent gold-bedizened skeleton of the tall drum-major of the 44th flourished with bony fingers his cane as he swaggered past. The grinning teeth were hidden by no curled moustache. The watcher, paralysed with the horror of her mental vision,

leant staring from the carriage. On went the awful pageant, the Grenadiers like a wall, their white skulls shining under black bearskins; the Light-bobs with their jaunty step, rattling their bones, and the captain of whom turned hollow sockets where love-lighted blue eyes had been wont to beam on her. She fell back then in a deadly swoon. When the fatal news came of the total destruction of the army, brought by the one man who alone escaped back from the jaws of the Khyber, that bitter prophetic cry, 'Merciful God, they are skeletons!' was remembered with awe."

Was he dreaming, or did he really hear that long ago hushed mother's voice? He looked at his hand—bones! He pulled back the sleeve of his shirt (his poshteen he had long since discarded as unbearable)—bones! All bones! He was a skeleton too. His wish had come true, he would be cool at last, he would stand up in his bones and feel the breeze blow through him. He flung off his turban and tried to rise. It was not so easy after all to move about when one is a skeleton. How shaky one's legs felt, how they tottered! why, they wouldn't even support him! And his head? Well, he didn't think much of a skull as a head-piece, it let one's brain swim about so queerly, everything jigged up and down; but perhaps that was because his eyes were gone, and he didn't know how to use sockets pro-

perly. Gad, it was comical! Would he rattle if he moved? He flung up his arms to try. The long kid glove, hanging from his hand like a white snake-skin, fluttered about as he waved his arms. Now he knew what the "one man" felt like who had escaped back through the Khyber. Great Scott! it was a "rum" sensation; he didn't care about it much, and thought he would get back into his flesh again. It had not seemed to him worth much before, it was so "deucedly hot and uncomfortable," still, he could stand up when he had it on, instead of swaying about in this tipsy, aimless way. But where was it? Had it melted, thawed, and resolved itself into a dew?

Ha, ha! He burst into a wild peal of hideous laughter, that rang out over the silent graves with a shout loud and grim enough to wake even those unheedful sleepers, tottered, reeled, clutched in a helpless unseeing way at nothing, and fell like a log to the ground.

CHAPTER VII.

DARKNESS, a delicious sense of coolness and rest, an odour of sweet flowers, and a low voice crooning a monotonous lullaby.

Where was he? Urquhart decided to get up and see, and succeeded in moving, perhaps an inch. Of course he knew. He was a baby, and that was his old nurse singing him to sleep. He had never known anything about it in those baby days when it all really took place, but that was a detail, he knew all about it now. But how dark and wizened she had grown, and how funnily she sat, croodled up on the floor instead of on a chair like a rational Christian. Slowly his eyes wandered about the unfamiliar place. There were no chairs, so no wonder she sat on the floor, poor thing! Where were they all? where the dickens was he?

“Mackenzie, I say, Mackenzie!”

A quick flow of soft jabber greeted his ear, a dark hand patted his head, smoothed his pillow—oblivion again.

So the days went by, each one bringing with

it longer spells of consciousness and increase of strength to mind and body, until the healthy vitality reasserted itself, and the young Englishman was ready to sit up once more, "clothed and in his right mind." He wondered he saw no one but the strange old woman and a fierce-browed, gloomy Pathan physician, who visited him twice a day, sometimes shaking his head lugubriously, at others nodding and muttering to himself. He had vague recollections of once or twice seeing someone make rapid passes and grotesque gesticulations over him as he had lain there in the clutches of the fever. Urquhart had found out the strong hold superstition had upon this wild, ungovernable people, and pondering over it now, he smiled to himself as he speculated which had cured him—the abominable decoctions he had swallowed, administered by the long-nailed black hand of his witch-like dusky attendant, or those weird magic spells. After all, what did it matter? He was certainly getting better, and that was the main point to concern himself about.

The room had always been redolent with the fragrance of flowers, fresh and sweet and daily renewed, bringing to him messages from the outer world of beauty and life beyond that shadowed chamber where he had been imprisoned. The scent of those flowers haunted him; he could remember how it had come into those tumultuous dreams he had been hurled through, like a cool breath of air through the

fever-heat of his throbbing brain. Who thought enough about the lonely exile to care to gather posies for his sick room? Assuredly not that old croon crouching there. She was good for many things, a tender, vigilant nurse in her way, but not the sort to think of flowers. Could it be——? His musings dare venture no further.

He caught the old creature's hand one morning to detain her as she pottered round him.

"Mother," he said, in his weak, foreign voice, "you have been good to the Feringhee, who can never repay you, for he is poor, poor as yourself. He can only give you his gratitude. Where am I, kind mother? What have I been doing?"

"The sahib has been ill many, many days. He is in the house of the Ahmed Khan."

"The sheikh! Then where is he? Why does he not come to see me?"

"The great Khan, sahib, is away fighting. He has gone to his son, who lives away beyond the mountains, to help him."

"So the Khan has a son?"

"Ay, sahib, a son who is the apple of one eye, and a daughter who is the apple of the other, and his very heart's core."

"A daughter?"

Urquhart showed interest.

"The Feringhee owes his life to the Khan's daughter. She found him in the graveyard, she

heard his shouts that day when no one else knew where he was. But she knew, she always knew," added the old woman, calmly betraying the heart's secret of her young mistress.

"How could she know? She had never seen me."

The nurse crossed the room, and began to pour something out of a large vessel into a small one.

"Because the Feringhee shuts his eyes and sees no one, does he think others do the same? The good Allah has given us eyes to see with, and it is our wisdom if we look at what is comely. The young Zorayda has a soft heart. She has had pity for the sahib since he came to Khelat, and she has watched him from her corner of the gallery. Now drink this, sahib, and you will sleep well."

The drink might have been a soothing potion, the information was decidedly the reverse. So it was the chief's daughter who had those soft clear eyes and the tiny wrists with the tinkling bracelets. And she had watched him. He put up his hand, and felt with dismay the long growth of beard, the unkempt hair. No, the deuce! there was no hair, he had been shaved. He smiled grimly, she wouldn't look at him now, gaunt, colourless, and scraggy. If only there were a mirror about that he might at least *know* how he did look!

The old woman, from a distant table, suddenly announced,

"She sends the sick man these flowers every day, she gathers them out of her own garden with her own little hands, and the fresh fruit he has eaten so often."

"She has a kind heart, your gracious mistress," said the invalid, feeling something was expected of him; and, for the first time, being at a loss for a pretty speech for a woman.

"She has," assented the old nurse, "she would do the same for a sick dog or a mule."

Urquhart somehow felt that rejoinder was invidious, but was too feeble to do more than grin to himself.

"Yes, she has a good heart, my little maiden; the great Allah send it happiness, as I fear me he will not." And the old creature sighed as she shuffled away.

But she grew more talkative after the ice was once broken, and told him many things of the inner economies of the house of the Ahmed Khan. Urquhart would have been more than human if he had resisted the temptation to draw her out on this subject of the fair unknown who had shown such interest in him. Whatever he ought to have done, there was one thing certain he did do—improve his powers of conversation in patois Pushtoo.

He was well now, needing no further attention; and he knew the time had come for him to

withdraw to his own quarters. But he shrank from the idea of returning to that coarse, uncongenial companionship; the dread of that, worse than isolation, appalled him. He decided to go out and look up his old haunts, which he ought to have summoned up courage to do some days ago. He collected together his few things, yet, few as they were, one was missing, had been missing from the first moment of his consciousness. He had felt for it vainly where he had kept it hidden, thrust into the little pocket he had clumsily made for it in his poshteen. Now he roamed about the room searching every garment and covering. No, it was gone, that small relic of a dead past, which he had carefully treasured, hoarding it over the heart he had meant to keep faithful to that broken idol. He strove to recall what he had been doing, where he had been when he was seized with that fever, and at last memory came to his aid. Perhaps it lay there still in the burial-ground, unnoticed, forgotten. He would, at any rate, go and see. It was a futile errand, he felt nearly sure, but the more he realised that his heart was *not* lacerated over the loss of that little glove the more he tried to work himself up into a desperate state of frenzy. The furious jealousy which had hitherto attacked him at the mere thought of that detested rival, who had, with his rupees, bought his "White Rose" from him, would not be roused now, the passionate anguish of thwarted desire

had burnt out with the fire which had attacked his body, and Urquhart found himself able to think almost pityingly of her, that she had had to lose *him*, and take instead that "heavy-headed dolt." He drew up his fine young form with pardonable conceit as he went down the steep descent, rejoicing in the vigorous health and spirits he had recovered. As he turned along the narrow path he had made between the rocks he paused abruptly, arrested by the sweet, slow tones of a woman's voice. Intruders on his seclusion!

He peered cautiously round a sheltering boulder and caught a glimpse of white draperies. Curiosity drew him forward the while his English gallantry held him back. One little peep more he *must* have, just one to see who had found out that hidden spot of his, who besides himself could appreciate the loneliness of it.

Half-reclining on a praying mat was a young girl. The dainty limbs showed faint outline through the clinging silk, her bare left arm lay along the ground from elbow to wrist and the hand of it busily fidgeted with the fingers of the right one. Her fine muslin veil was tossed off beside her and her face was exposed to view. What a vision! Urquhart would not have been a man had he resisted the temptation to approach nearer. He almost held his breath as he looked down on the bent profile framed by the tumbling masses of rich hair which grew low and curly round the perfect oval of the

smooth brow. The red pouting lips moved slightly now and then as if speaking to themselves, not to the companion near by, in whose familiar crouching attitude Urquhart recognised his old nurse of the last days.

This then must be the Khan's daughter, Zorayda! At last it was his turn to see without being seen, and he took full advantage of the opportunity, each moment falling more and more under the spell of her seductive beauty. So entranced was he with the exceeding loveliness of her face that at first he did not notice what was so intently occupying her until she impatiently raised herself and said something in quick Pushtoo to the old duenna. Then he did indeed feel astonishment so violent as nearly to betray his presence.

There on her right hand was a glove, his lost treasure. The girl had not understood its manipulation. She had forced it on back to front, the fingers, unaccustomed to such confinement, stuck stiffly out from the palm, and the long length of kid with its numerous buttons dangled from the shapely wrist as she held out the hand in varied positions to try each effect. The hand was smaller than the one which the glove had originally fitted, and the wearer seemed to guess something was amiss, for she knitted her arched brows together in a puzzled frown and a disappointed droop curved the sensitive mouth downwards.

"Ah, Matto," she said, "it is no use, I could never be like her. Who is she, Matto? Where is she? Away beyond those hills, dost thou think, where the Feringhee lives? Matto"—the girl drew closely up to her nurse and put her arm round the wrinkled neck—"tell me again, art thou sure, quite, quite sure, that I am beautiful? Tell me only the truth, Matto, dear, dear Matto."

"My heart's delight, thou dost know it well," said the doting old creature. "Does not the Afzul——"

"Ah! how canst thou, Matto, so anger me with thy Afzul? *Afzul!*" The girl pushed her frantically away and threw herself petulantly on the ground again. Her clustering hair tumbled about the heaving bosom and the dark eyes flashed out beneath the arched brows. She laid her round cheek on the shabby glove, then shyly pressed it with her lips. Matto saw the action.

"Ah, my star," she said, "why caress the thing that has belonged to her, who may say, his wife?"

"Wife?" Zorayda turned gleaming eyes upon her. "Do you think he would be here, *alone*, if he had a wife? She would be with him."

"But, my child, thou dost not know, he is poor——"

"Then would she cling the closer to him," she responded, with the sweet creed of love

unadulterated by worldliness, "she would follow him over the mountains until she found him."

"Ah, but the Feringhees are cold and wise like their white faces and white hearts."

"She cannot love him," broke in the girl, her mind able to grasp only one thought. "If she did, she would not, she could not let him go!"

"Ay, thou art right, my sweet, *she* cannot and *thou must* not love him!" The woman spoke with slow emphasis and her face looked sad and anxious as she watched the beautiful creature beside her.

"Must not! What dost thou mean, Matto?"

"Thou must love the Afzul. He seeks thee in marriage. He is rich and brave and one of thine own people; thou wouldst do well to marry him. Has not he thrown over thee the sheet of betrothal? And was not it made of finest linen, such as I never saw before?"

"And what did I do with it?" cried the girl, sitting up and tossing back her curls. "Did not I drag it off, throw it on the ground, and trample on it? I will have none of him!"

"Ah, but sweet, think well, he is in earnest. Has he not stolen a lock of thy hair, and does he not wear it an amulet round his neck? He is rich, he can give thee all. And the Afzul is a great master, where he will, he will. He will have all he wants."

"Oh, Matto, Matto, hush! Thou wilt drive

me desperate. Thou dost know my poor heart, wilt not thou help thy child?"

"I would help thee, my jewel, my star, with this old life if I could. And the best way to help thee is to make thee see Afzul as thou oughtest. Thou must shut thy blinds close and look no more on the Feringhee. Thy father would never, never consent. And Afzul——"

"Ever, ever Afzul! I *will not* hear of him! Hast thou not known from the first day he was brought into my father's presence, weary and white, and all his face one great sadness, that I have loved the Feringhee? Canst thou not understand"—she laid her hand on the woman's shoulder and almost shook her in her excited agitation—"that I *love* him? How can I think of another, of Afzul, when all my life is with the Feringhee?"

"Ah, my child, my child, what dost thou say? He is poor and will ever be so. And some day he will escape; thou canst not hope to bind him here."

"If he is poor, then all the better for me to show my love. I am rich, thou knowest when I marry how rich I shall be. I can give it all to him and make him happy and content."

"But he loves thee not," she went on with cruel kindness, though she saw how the words cut like a knife into the tender heart of her darling. "That thing upon thy hand belongs to the woman he loves."

“Ah, it cannot be, it cannot be ! Matto, say thou art only speaking because thou wouldst ever talk. Did not I plead with my father for his life the day he came ? He spared him for my sake. He is mine. If I tell my father I love him and shall die if I do not have him, he will listen to me. He loves me so, he cares only for my happiness.”

“But think, my little one, he is an infidel, he believes not in thy God. How couldst thou wed with such a dog ?”

“Silence !” cried the girl, her woman’s heart waking within her to defend the object of her devotion at all hazards. “He is too true and brave not to believe in what is good. And I would teach him by my love, or ” — she dropped her voice, “he would teach me—and I—I have no thought but what would be his.”

The old woman was desperate in her vain efforts to shut the gate upon the flood of passionate love which had broken its bounds and must now sweep on to happiness or ruin the young heart tossing on its breast. One last attempt she made.

“If thou carest not for thyself, my sweet one, think of the Feringhee. Thou knowest the hatred of the Afzul is stronger even than his love. The day thou showest thy preference for the white infidel will be the day of his doom. The Afzul will have his life. I have warned

thee. Ah, do not look at me like that ! I have done naught to thee, only thought for thee !”

With a low cry the girl flung herself at full length on the mat, and her thick hair hid her face from view.

Urquhart crept noiselessly away, his heart beating to suffocation, and his brain in a turmoil of dismay and remorse at having so lucklessly played the eavesdropper. Yet through it all there passed a thrill of joy, almost awe, at that insight into the simple heart of the Afridi maiden, a bit of pure Nature, untouched by blemishing hand.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE Khan and his band returned that day. From the window of the room he was vacating, Urquhart leaned out to watch the arrival. What a noble old figure it was; how proudly erect and dignified sat the tall gaunt form on the tired charger!

Early durbar was held the next morning. Absent chief and sick guardsman were in their accustomed places, but the fretted screen on the right hand corner of the gallery remained sedulously closed. How dismal and dark that corner looked unlighted by the soft gleam of starry eyes, or the sparkle from jewelled fingers!

The young Englishman stood quiet and listless as usual, paying small heed to the discussions and janglings going on behind him between the townsmen and the hillmen, who frequently attended for the settlement of minor disputes.

The babel of tongues was at its height. It ceased suddenly, and in the dread silence which

followed came a rumble as of artillery carriages, louder and louder; the ground heaved, and the old tower rocked to its foundations. A shower of *débris* and dust half smothered the crowd below. Then, to their terrified gaze was revealed a glimpse of blue sky through the split roof. A moment they stood paralysed in the spell of that awful terror, then guards, chiefs, rabble of hillmen, groups of townsmen rushed from the durbar with unmanly haste and mighty clamour and confusion, tumbling and hustling each other in their struggle to escape through the archway of the audience hall ere it fell upon them under the influence of that quaking earth.

The old Khan alone sat still, with a grim smile of contempt drawing down the corners of his determined mouth, while he sent a long curl of smoke from his hookah to mingle with the dust flying in unsettled clouds about him. He looked round the empty hall, and saw only the Englishman standing there behind him with folded arms and impassive face just as he had stood throughout the meeting.

"Why hast thou not gone with the rest, young man?" the Khan demanded. "Thy life is young, and mine is nearly past."

"The Kismet that is good enough for thee is good enough for me, my father." He drew himself to attention, and gave his usual English salute, which military habit he had never

dropped, nor had the Khan demanded it of him. Though not admitting it, he had always inwardly admired the sharp neat movements and erect soldierly bearing of his alien guardsman, whose head looked too proudly set on his square shoulders to learn easily the more servile Oriental salaam.

They left the partially wrecked durbar together, and from that hour the chief seemed to look upon Urquhart with almost fatherly regard. He led him back to the citadel, where he was for the future admitted as a resident, and where he continued to hold the room he had occupied during his illness. On the threshold of the doorway the Khan paused, and, turning, confronted the young soldier with his eagle glance.

"Feringhee," he said, "this is the greatest mark of my confidence I can give thee; see thou dost deserve it. Once didst thou offer to guard my honour. Guard now that, too, of those dear to me."

The hot blood rushed in a sudden torrent to the young soldier's face as there came upon him the memory of that scene in the burial-ground. What might it not mean to him? All the chivalry in him rose at the appeal. Even the Khan did not know the test to which he had put him. His voice roused him from his thoughts.

"Thou hast shown how thou canst obey,

now shalt thou show how thou canst command. I am going to form a new band in preparation for the troubles I see ahead of the sons of my guard and others, and to thee I will entrust their training. They are wild and rude, and need a steady hand and strong will over them. Wilt thou undertake it?"

Urquhart almost shouted his answer in the exuberance of his joy. He felt like an enlisted man who has suddenly gained his commission and leapt from drudgery to freedom. He seized the old man's hand in his strong grip, and held it firmly as he said:

"All I can hope to do is to serve thee as thou has served me. More I could not do."

From that day a new life began for the exile. He had full liberty and opportunity to exercise his undoubted military talents, and, best of all, he was surrounded now by refinement bordering on luxury. Afghan warrior as he was, the Khan at heart was a cultured gentleman, with a well-stored mind and a profound depth of thought.

Interest in the living speedily cured a taste for the society of the dead. The graveyard was forsaken for the parade ground which he himself marked out, and where he held the drills with systematic English precision. It gave zest to his work to feel that, like a true Englishman, he was, in an unrecognised way, serving his country in train-

ing warlike Afghans to meet the torrent of Central Asian and Muscovite invasion that must sooner or later sweep through the passes of the Hindoo Koosh. The men soon recognised their master, unswerving where duty was concerned, kind and friendly, and one of them the moment the word of dismissal had been given. He won their hearts speedily by his simple honesty and lack of self-consciousness, and by that peculiarly winning look on his open English face.

All hearts but one. Afzul rejected all advances, remaining estranged and fostering bitter hate and jealousy until it grew into an overpowering torrent of deadly rage, and he became his implacable though unacknowledged foe.

The long active days, when he threw himself heart and soul into his work, were pleasantly rounded off by quiet, restful evenings, when he smoked and played chess with the Khan, and listened to his accounts of wonderful deeds of daring, exciting chase after big game, lonely forays in the desolate gorges and on the bleak mountain sides. The keen mind of the old hillman was aroused by the wider knowledge the bright young stranger, fresh from a world of life and experiment, brought to him. Urquhart would ransack his brain for matters to interest and satisfy the insatiable thirst for information the Khan unfailingly evinced.

Sometimes the talk turned to deeper matters ;

to religion, and, far apart as they were in their principles, Urquhart found that there was more in common between Christianity and Mahomedanism than he had thought possible.

"We Mahomedans look upon Christ as a great prophet," said the old man, in his slow, thoughtful way; "and we call Him 'Hazaret Isa,' but Christ is not *God* to us. He is a man with the Divine Spirit of God. We believe that He will come eventually to judge the world, not Mahomet. My religion differs from yours mainly in that we can acknowledge but one God. There *is* but one, and He is Allah. He sent Mahomet to turn men from bestowing on Christ what belonged to God alone. How is it possible," he went on, the fire of his earnestness showing in his intent piercing eyes, and in the deepened fervour of his voice, "how *can* it be possible that you, who with your spy-glasses have found so many more worlds than we know of or our forefathers could see, can derogate from the greatness of the Creator in attributing to Him the Fatherhood of the Son of God by a mortal woman? How can you go still further and imagine that Fatherhood capable of such an abhorrent act as that of killing His own son? It is inconceivable! And had this sacred tragedy to be enacted in all those other worlds that you call stars?"*

* Kindly suggested by a friend, who, himself, held the conversation.

There was no answer but silence. The young fellow, whose ideas, perhaps never analysed, were not so entirely at variance with those of the staunch follower of Mahomet, dare neither contradict nor argue, yet he could not help having profound respect for the belief in that one great unapproachable Allah, and the reliance every good soldier has in Kismet, and which had always been a strong motive power with him.

He the more readily let pass, therefore, the statement made later by the Khan that he had become a believer. The term was wide and left much to the imagination; Urquhart, therefore, did not feel his integrity called in question by the slurring over of the announcement. It might certainly lead to the smoothening of the rather dangerous path he had to walk, and that was the vital point at the moment. It must be admitted that there was in Urquhart's disposition a vein of fatal weakness which might ultimately mar what would otherwise be a noble character. He was by nature light, too easily content to drift with the current. Things weighed with him for the moment merely; if difficult of solution he let them slide. If life had gone well with him this flaw might never have been detected, the slight instability might perhaps even have been left undisturbed, so that it was practically as good as not there, but——

Ah well, it is the "buts" and the "might-have-beens" of life that show us what we really are. To "glide on the easy current" puts no test on the rigging, it is the unexpected strain from adverse winds which finds the weak rope. So now, this awful and solemn question scarcely touched him beyond raising the passing thought that after all Mahomedanism was "uncommonly like the other thing," and the moment of seriousness went off.

One evening Urquhart ventured to allude to a subject, however, that was always to the fore in his thoughts just then—the Khan's daughter. He did it diffidently, merely "putting out a feeler," as he termed it to himself, for his secretly acquired knowledge had made him more acutely sensitive about her than he was generally on the matter of the other sex.

The old woman who had nursed him, he said, had told him he partly owed his life to her young mistress, who had found him when no one else knew where he was. He would like to have his gratitude conveyed to her. The chief showed discomfort at the turn in the conversation.

"My little daughter is young and ignorant, and her good heart runs away with her head. Forget what that chattering, indiscreet old woman has said."

Urquhart retired into his shell of reticence at once, accepting the snub, but having his curiosity

the more piqued thereby. Sometimes he would hear a low female voice talking in the inner room, which was divided from the general living room by heavy curtains of felt, richly embroidered, drawn across the arch; once a merry girlish laugh penetrated; another time melodious tones singing a quaint barbaric song to some unknown instrument reached him.

The Khan invited him up to the tower of the Balla Hissar one evening to smoke. There, leaning against the battlement in her favourite attitude,* was Zorayda. She drew her veil quickly about her and moved away, but her father laid a detaining touch on her shoulder and drew her to him.

"Stay a while, little one, the night is early, and now comes the cool refreshing air after the hot day."

She waited dutifully, perhaps willingly had he known it, while he settled himself on his couch, then she nestled up to him. Nothing was to be seen but folds of muslin, occasionally a fleeting peep from dark eyes; now and then the tuneful tinkle of armlets and sequins was heard as she moved. There stole over the young fellow the restfulness, that indescribable sense of "home," a woman's presence rarely fails to impart. As he stretched out his long limbs and lay at ease on the comfortable divan, Urquhart began to feel almost happy. He knew he had won the confidence of his chief; that

satisfied the natural cravings of his man's nature for the esteem of those about him, and—but he tried to stifle further thought. It was wrong to her, dangerous for him. A hundred times he wished he had not become the possessor of that secret of hers, and just as often did he lie and gloat over the sweet knowledge—he did so yearn for human sympathy. Here was more than sympathy—love, pure and passionate, and unswayed by any lower touch, a very storehouse for him to claim, and he did not dare to put out his hand even to take the key to unlock it. The Khan trusted him, his honour bound him. As a brother might he protect her, as a lover must he not think of her. Was not he a Feringhee and a unbeliever in their eyes?

It was a Thursday evening, and he watched with half-lowered eyelids the slow straggling procession of women and men returning from their weekly visit to their dead, their praying-mats tossed over their shoulders. He smiled sarcastically. How devout they were in those attentions, and yet how marvellously eager to add to the number who required ministrations and prayers! They spilt blood as recklessly as one spills water, nor did life itself seem of more account in their eyes.

As he mused thus, and the Khan smoked and exchanged a word now and then with Zorayda, steps were heard ascending the stone stairway

behind them. Afzul appeared upon the scene. A heavy frown settled on his face when he saw the homely little group, and the bitter sullen look marred the handsome features. Zorayda's bracelets jingled rapidly as she drew her veil more closely round her and dropped her arms beneath it. Nothing could now be seen but a mound of white linen, like a snow heap unflecked by soiling speck.

"A messenger has arrived and awaits speech of the Khan in the durbar below," announced Afzul.

"Whence comes he, Afzul?" asked the chief, his face betraying anxiety.

"From thy son."

"My son?" The old man was on his feet at once. That assuredly meant bad news. "What message does he bring?"

"The man would speak to thee, sirdar."

"I will come at once—go, tell him to await me. Proceed!" he ordered as the young captain hesitated, glancing over his shoulder to where Zorayda now stood beside Urquhart. She was trembling, and her dark eyes were wistful and timorous as she listened. Afzul, not daring to linger longer, cast a look of maievolence on Urquhart and vanished.

"Father, dearest, look not so!" cried the girl, springing to his side and throwing her arm about him, in her alarm and grief forgetting entirely the presence of the stranger, who con-

siderately turned away. "It will be well, dear father, it *must* be well."

"It will be as Allah wills, my child. Detain me not, I must hear the news."

"But thou wilt soon return and tell me the news of Rohmadil?"

"That I will, dear one. Now go below."

The lower part of the durbar was thronged by a jabbering, gesticulating crowd as the Khan, closely followed by his young guardsman, entered the hall through the private arch at the upper end. Serafrauz advanced to meet him with the messenger. The man had travelled in hot haste, and looked wilder and fiercer than even the ordinary wild Afridi Urquhart had become accustomed to. In a few words he explained that Rohmadil Khan needed help, for he had no tribe near on whose friendly assistance he could rely, and affairs were showing a desperate aspect.

"You hear, my brave warriors?" called out the Khan, in his sonorous tones; "I need volunteers; who will go?"

Urquhart sprang forward and gave his prompt salute, his face working with the excitement of anticipated fighting; Serafrauz had no need to acquiesce; Afzul was eager for fresh glory. A quick consultation was held, the men were to be summoned, preparations made over-night, and early in the dawn would the contingent start. All was bustle and noise. Urquhart was

about to depart to summon his young recruits, from whom he hoped great things, determining, if *he* could make it possible, that they and he together should win their spurs, when he caught the mention of his name—"the Feringhee"—in Afzul's voice, who was speaking to the chief.

"How canst thou trust him?" he was saying. "Thy son dwells in the very teeth of the Pass—how dost thou know the Feringhee will not turn his accursed treachery to account and escape through the Khyber, and betray thee and thine? Thou durst not take him with thee. Thou hast had no real proof that he is faithful; the test thou wouldst now put is more than mortal man could stand. Yet also canst thou not leave him here, a traitor in a defenceless fort. Thou must kill him, else will he betray us all!"

Oh, how the blood boiled in the veins of the Englishman as he heard his honour thus questioned; how his hand tingled to smite the insulter across his lying, handsome face!

"Enough!" said the Khan. "That is my affair, Afzul. Dare not to encroach on thy privileges; see *thou* do thy duty well, I ask no more from thee!"

"Thy folly be on thy own head then, when the Feringhee turns on thee. Allah goes not with us where the accursed white-faced unbeliever is."

Urquhart suddenly stepped in, unable longer to endure silence.

“The great Allah makes no distinction of the outward colour, He reads the heart, Sahib Afzul, and He knows the secrets of all. And Allah is as great and near to me as to you. Allah is Allah to all, by whatever name we call Him, or how we worship.” Turning to the Ahmed, he said: “The day, my chief, thou hast one spark of distrust in the Feringhee, slay him with thine own hand; he will have deserved it. But Allah will grant to me a chance of proving how an Englishman can fight for his honour!”

The grey streaks of dawn were faintly penetrating the windows of his room when the Ahmed returned to his home, Urquhart still with him. A slim, shadowy ghost flitted towards them from a gloomy corner. The ray of light touched the white head and figure, and shone on the extended hands.

“My child,” exclaimed the old man, “why art thou here?”

“I could not rest, dear father, until I had seen thee and heard what had happened. I know thou art going away again. I have watched the soldiers gathering in the courtyard. Oh, dear father, must thou indeed go again and leave thy little Zorayda?” She clung to him, raising her face beseechingly, and, at the sudden movement, her veil fell off, and Urquhart saw once more the lovely face, with its quivering lips and tear-filled eyes.

The Khan stooped and kissed her tenderly

and slowly. "Think, my star, it is thy brother who needs me. Thou wilt be a warrior's daughter and a soldier's sister, wilt thou not? and send me forth strong to fight, not weak because I leave thee here fretting."

"Yes, father, I will let thee go, and I will be brave as thou art, and pray to Allah to guard thee. But oh!" she wailed, in afterthought, "thou art so brave, *too* brave for any peace to be in this poor heart of mine. Thou wilt never guard thyself, thou only thinkest how thou canst guard others. Oh, Sahib Feringhee," in her sweet fear and trouble turning suddenly to him, and laying a clinging hand on his arm; "thou, too, art brave, I see it in thy true face, wilt *thou* guard him, wilt thou keep him from danger when thou canst? Thou dost not know him as I do, he is so fearless, so rash! For the sake of this poor heart left behind in fear, wilt thou protect him?"

Urquhart felt a thrill of delicious enthusiasm pass through him as his chivalry awoke at the gentle touch and voice. "With my life, dear lady, and for thy sweet sake!" He took her finger tips in his strong grasp and slowly placed his lips upon them. Touch aroused self-consciousness. She drew shyly away, and the beauteous vision vanished behind the tantalising veil.

CHAPTER IX.

THE reckless lawlessness of the foray in which Urquhart found himself mixed up was an exciting and unique experience. There seemed to the trained and drilled English lieutenant no method in their madness. Furious encounters among the narrow passes, where the hurling of stones torn from the earth was the favourite mode of procedure, heartless butchery for the mere lust of killing, wholesale destruction of property, was no honest warfare. He grew accustomed to the frequent chapoas, or night attacks, where lives were lost by deeds of dark treachery, not by open encounter. From the first he had realised the peril in which the Khan's son was placed, for the enemy more than trebled his small force.

All night long had Urquhart stood on the rampart of the citadel, watching the scene of destruction going on around. In utter wantonness were the enemies setting fire to every inflammable object within reach, until about the village without the walls spread a sheet of flame,

turning the darkness of the night into a very hell on earth. Gesticulating figures danced wildly round the fires, their shouts of execration and curses sounding above the roar of the flames and the crackling of the wood like yells from Pandemonium.

The young Afridi chief stood beside Urquhart, a look of bitter despair on his swarthy face, while the naked tulwar in his twitching hand flashed in the ruddy glare. At last the flames died away from want of fuel to feed them, and the shrieking chorus retired to the adjoining passes. A hasty debate was held, where it was determined to make a sally at break of day and drive the besiegers over the mountain to the valley beyond.

Urquhart hailed the resolution with joy. He was burning to join in a bold dash forward instead of submitting to this imprisoned attack. It was with a thrill of delight he therefore headed his band. Not waiting for the dawn to appear, they sallied forth from the gates, over the fire-wasted ground, to the foot of the mountain. Ere the word of command was given, the excited blood-thirsty mob of soldiers tore up the incline, uttering their war-cries and brandishing their tulwars. The enemy, affecting surprise as decoy, fled up the mountain, racing away from the fire of the long jezails poured into them.

Rohmadil led the charge. He knew the ground well, and desperation lent him wings.

On he tore, outdistancing his followers, as the foe receded inch by inch before him. Urquhart climbed on, watching him from below as he appeared on peak after peak, until a sudden cry of horror escaped him. There above them, on an elevated plateau, well protected by the overhanging boulders, could be seen the peeping guns, here and there the red tips and faint blue smoke of the match. And Rohmadil did not see, did not pause to think, was blind to all but his mad desire to come up to them and "smite them hip and thigh." Then he vanished round another turn, but Urquhart could hear the dull reports of the matchlocks and the yells of rage, and he strained himself to put on one more spurt as he shouted to his men a word of encouragement.

They had met—all was one mad *mêlée*, where friend and foe were hardly distinguishable in the dim light and the thick smoke. Urquhart once recognised the towering form of Rohmadil as he slashed about him, his turban off, the blood dripping from his upraised blade, soaking the shaggy fringe of hair round the sleeveless poshteen, and staining the blue of his shirt to purple—ere he had really seen him he was gone! A bullet fired from a rock above had found its billet, and Rohmadil had dropped where he stood. Urquhart roared the order to his men to close in as he strove to reach the prostrate man. He was dizzy with heat and

breathlessness, and the very air seemed dark about him, but he struck madly out, only aware of a desperate feeling which kept him up while power of thought and discrimination was gone. There was a hideous clashing of steel and roar of curses, past almost before realised, and it was all over. Urquhart fell across the body of Rohmadil, with a vague mixed idea that he was dead himself, and had "better lie still and cool off."

In the cool of the evening the Khan held a council for his son, who was lying still unconscious. The meeting was over, and the various members lounged about or squatted in attitudes of repose, puffing at their hookahs, and letting the feelings of drowsiness their hard labours of the early day had earned steal soothingly over them.

Urquhart had been in attendance, and was lying now on the soft fur of his poshteen, which he had pulled off and converted into a temporary mat. He was smoking his short English pipe, and listlessly watching the old handsome face of the Khan, who was deep in one of his profound meditations. The habitual fierceness of his expression was softened now by that peculiar distant look which rested there at times—as if he saw beyond his mere surroundings into a region of possibilities. Urquhart was marvelling how he could so skilfully hide the almost anguish of anxiety that he knew was gnawing at his very vitals.

The smoke died down and the hookah went out. The Khan himself awoke to the fact at last, roused up, and called the hookah burdar to refill it. The man had placed the glowing fireball on the bowl to ignite the tobacco and retired to his mat again, when there was heard a slight noise at the end of the hall. Someone was seen to be hurriedly entering. His agitated air presaged bad news. Alarm spread among the men. The worst was feared—a few words and the worst was told. Rohmadil Khan was dead—had died suddenly while the physician was even in attendance.

All eyes turned upon the Khan to watch the effect of such news upon a calmness which no one had ever yet seen disturbed. Urquhart, from his post near by, saw the vein-streaked hand gripping the pipe-stem tremble. It shook the fireball from the bowl. A deft movement from the young soldier and the ball was caught ere it dropped. With a composure equalling that the chief had momentarily lost, Urquhart held the live coal in his tortured palm, then the fireball was unobtrusively put back on the bowl, and no one but the Khan himself and his Feringhee guardsman ever knew of that brief uncontrollable spasm.

The chief looked gratefully up, his eyes expressing what his lips had no power to utter. Not even in the moment when worse than death had fallen on him—the extinction in the male

line of his renowned race—had the boasted fatalist betrayed by one quiver of the muscles to that observant crowd what he was suffering.

He slowly drew a long breath of the perfumed smoke, letting it as slowly curl out from his lips and nostrils ere he made a sign or spoke one word. Then, calmly taking the mouthpiece from his mouth, he rose and said :

“Allah is great and His will be done. Chiefs and warriors of the Afridi, Allah has taken from me my son to-day, but see, he has prepared a substitute. He has given me another. From this day is the Feringhee as a son to Ahmed Khan. And Allah will change his unbelief to faith !”

He put out his hand—perfectly steady now—and laid it on Urquhart's shoulder. The staunch blue English eyes looked straight into the dark saddened ones, and the heart which for so many weary weeks had been starved by loneliness, awoke at that appealing touch a living happy thing. The thorn, left rankling there when the “White Rose” had been dragged from its shrine, was drawn now, and the freed wound would heal and leave not even a scar behind.

The new life of his adoption was closing about Urquhart very tightly now. The Afghan chief had laid upon him fetters stronger than the strongest prison chains.

CHAPTER X.

UP the rugged path to Khelat once more ! How Urquhart's thoughts flew back to the day he had seen it first—footsore, weary, and desperate, an exile in a hostile land. Now youth and hope were strong within him, ambition to root the good opinion his honest life had planted, esteem for the old man at his side who bore his crushing blow with such a Spartan front, surely these were enough to make him content ? But were these all the thoughts which made him look with almost pleasure upon the grim old fort ?

He raised his eyes and scanned the tower. It was a month since he had seen it. A month is a long test for some things—it may strengthen, it may weaken. Which did he hope ? What did he fear ? Well, fear was set at rest, hope beat afresh.

There was a flutter of white draperies at the lattice window on the right side of the arch, a small hand waving welcome, and as the tired guardsman passed under, a shower of falling roses and lotos flowers. Urquhart stooped and

rescued a spray of roses from its dusty fate, placed it daringly to his lips, while his merry blue eyes flashed back a smile of recognition to the brown ones he felt sure were there. As he lowered his glance, it fell upon the figure of Afzul just emerging from the citadel gateway. He had returned to Khelat a few days previously. Perhaps it was the shadow from the deep arch, perhaps—Urquhart did not trouble to analyse the cause (better for him if he had!), but he casually thought it was about as evil an expression as he had ever seen, and hurried on, eager to get to his quarters and a refreshing bath after the long hot march.

He smiled again as he entered his room after his toilet. A woman's hand had indeed left traces of her presence—Matto, *of course!* A comfortable divan filled one corner, some rich soft rugs thrown over it; a curiously inlaid table stood near with a piled-up dish of luscious fruits on it surrounded by a profusion of flowers. There were flowers everywhere; how daintily Matto had arranged them, with a light, graceful touch one would hardly have expected from those shrivelled, bony fingers. Well, it was very good of Matto.

Urquhart flung himself full length on the divan and settled down to enjoy a bountiful repast of the fruit. He had just begun to feel delightfully drowsy and peaceful when footsteps could be heard nearing, and Serafrauz begged

admittance. He was fresh from an interview with the Khan, and had come to congratulate the Feringhee on the high favour he had apparently gained. Serafrauz was naturally a man of few words. Urquhart was used to his silent companionship, and generally left him, as now, to himself after he had offered him tobacco and fruit. He was, therefore, a trifle surprised when Serafrauz presently roused himself from the deep thought in which he had been plunged, and showed inclination for conversation.

"Sahib, I would be thy friend, though I was once thy jailor."

"No, not my jailor, but my friend even then, Serafrauz. But—do I need a friend?" he added.

The captain looked at him, faint astonishment on his face. "The Feringhee does not know the heart of the Afridi, or he would not speak so. Thou hast an enemy, and a man with such needs a thousand friends to guard him—then does he not always escape."

"What wouldst thou say?" asked Urquhart, laying aside his short pipe and sitting up. He saw there was something more serious here than he had anticipated.

"I mean," said Serafrauz, leaning forward and speaking with intentness, "Afzul is thy foe. Beware, sahib. It is true that thou art under the protection of the Khan, for the Afridi,

as thou hast proved, can be also friend, but Afzul is an Afridi who hates as he loves, to the end—to *the end*, sahib. His life is ruled by Pushtoonwullie : he will bide his time, but he will strike."

"What art thou hinting at, Serafrauz? Speak out. I am a soldier, and I can defend myself against even an Afzul."

"That canst thou not, young man," broke in the other, with sudden heat, "else wouldst thou long ago have seen need for caution. Dost thou know that Afzul would marry the Khan's daughter—he has already sought her, and it was thought she looked with favour on him, as did the Khan. But the old man is loth to part with his only daughter, and would have no hurry." The voice dropped to sudden gentleness. "He loved the Zorayda's mother. She was the pearl in his crown, and—she was stolen from him. The feud that followed that dishonour lasted many years, but Ahmed Khan avenged her death, and the bones of her destroyer lie bleaching on yon mountain," and he pointed out through the open window to the distant undulating horizon.

"Go on," said Urquhart, his interest greatly roused. That peculiar refinement of the grand old face was accounted for : the flame of suffering had cleansed the dross from the pure gold.

"Since the Feringhee came to be among us,

the Afzul's suit has not prospered. Zorayda has rejected his betrothal veil. I say again, beware, sahib. Already has it been spread about what took place in Rohmadil Khan's durbar the day of his death. The words of the Khan showed thee a mark of his favour he has bestowed on none else, and the Afzul loves thee not the better for it. I have warned thee, and I will watch for thee."

Urquhart put out his hand and laid it on the rough hairy one resting on the seat of his divan. Wonder was mingled with gratitude. What had he done to win the friendship of this man which, in the nature of things, should have been bestowed upon one of his own race, not upon an unknown alien?

"I am not foolish nor indiscreet, Serafrauz, and I will accept thy warning and be on my guard. It would be folly to do else. But why shouldst thou care one jot for me—a Fer-inghee, an unbeliever?"

"There thou dost not know thyself, sahib. Thou art no unbeliever, thy word is true, and thou hast said, 'Allah is Allah to all.' That is enough for me. But I would tell thee——"

A long pause. Serafrauz refilled his pipe, slowly drew it, then sat back on the rug in front of the divan. He did not speak for some time. Urquhart, concluding he had repented of his most unusual loquacity, for he had found out how rarely broken is the reserve of an

Oriental over his private affairs, refrained from urging him to continue. If he chose later to go on, it would all come in good time; if he had changed his mind, Urquhart was not the man to press anyone's confidence.

"Sahib," said the deep voice suddenly, as the mouthpiece was removed, "hast thou ever loved?" The quick flush which reddened the young fellow's face was answer enough. "Ah, but thou art young, and youth loves often. When thou art older and the sands of thy life run low in the hour-glass, then thou mayest know what love means—love that is as extinguishable as the sun itself, and will last 'till the leaves of the Judgment Book unfold.' When the blood flows slow it flows strong. Such was my love. Nay, start not; think not because I am old now and grey and rugged as our bare mountain rocks, that I could not love. It is for *Zorayda's* sake, not for thine, Feringhee, that I would guard thy life."

Urquhart sprang up and stood before him. Serafrauz rose too, and the two men faced each other. "Zorayda!" gasped Urquhart.

"I have said it. It is for Zorayda's sake I have so spoken to thee. What art *thou* to me? Zorayda loves thee, that is enough for me."

"Stop! Not another word!" cried Urquhart quickly, his English chivalry up in arms to defend even the name of a woman being dis-

cussed. That secret knowledge, too, made him doubly quick to be on her defence.

Serafrauz seized his arm. "Thou wilt not say thou dost not love her! True, thou hast not seen her as I have, from a little playing child, growing up among us day by day with her sweet eyes and lovely mouth made to drive men mad with longing—Ah! not *her* mouth—not hers!" He turned away and leaned against the wall beside the open window.

What was all this? What had come over the stern repressed warrior that he should be so moved out of all likeness to himself?

"Serafrauz," said Urquhart, advancing nearer to him, "as man to man would I speak to thee, not as Afghan and Feringhee. The same honour should bind all where a woman is concerned. Thou hast partly trusted me, I will trust thee. Thou sayest that Zorayda lov—— has honoured me with her esteem. I do not know. I would rather not believe it, I am worth no love. But even if it were so, and I had love to give back for love, I would never come between thee and her. Thou lovest her, thou art worthy of her; win her, and Allah bless thee both."

"Thou wouldst give her up? She is beautiful as the day, and as pure. Thou dost not know her."

"I do," said Urquhart, briefly. "I have seen her beauty of face and her devotion to

her father. But thou art first. If thou dost think some passing fancy for the Feringhee has turned her thoughts from thee, I will get leave to go away until the fleeting pity in her gentle heart has died. I will not take from thee thy happiness, Serafrauz."

"But consider, thou standest also in the way of Afzul."

"Afzul is naught to me," said Urquhart, with quick contempt. "He and I are on equal ground. If I should become *his* rival, let him look to himself as I will look to myself."

"Ah, bravely spoken, young man. Now is my heart lightened, now will I trust thee with a confidence no man has ever guessed, a secret none know. I said it was for Zorayda's sake I had spoken thus. It was not for her sake, but for her dead mother's—for the sake of the dead Zorayda whom I loved."

He turned abruptly away and leaned far out of the open casement.

Urquhart left him to his wished-for silence, went back to his seat, and busied himself with his pipe and his reflections. Serafrauz came back presently from that long gaze.

"It is all past these many years, but time heals not all wounds. I loved her—many loved her. She was the Pearl of Khelat. But I was only a captain and he was the Khan. He never knew I was his rival, she never knew either. I went out on a foray; when I came

back she was his' wife. I bore it because she was happy. Then came that dark day when she was stolen from us, how none ever knew. Sahib, Allah is good—he gave to *me* the chance to slay the cursed thief who stole the Pearl of our city. With this hand"—he held out his great right hand and looked at it with fierce exultation—"I slew him. The tulwar hangs on my wall, untouched since that red stain began to rust upon it. It helps me to remember the goodness of God in granting to *me* that moment when my hand revenged her. But the love is as strong to-day as it was then; and for her sake, my lost dead love, I have spoken thus, and laid bare my heart that perchance I might give to her child what her heart craves for. Now thou knowest. Matto has told me that thou hast won Zorayda's heart. The Khan knows it, but he cannot bring himself to give his daughter to thee yet. In a little time perhaps, who may tell! Thou hast a winning way with thee," he said, half-meditatively. "That is a gift denied to most. Enough. Thou art a brave man, and I trust thee. Speak not of this again. If thou canst, forget what I have told thee of myself."

The next moment Serafrauz was gone and Urquhart was alone with his bewildered thoughts.

Afzul's unveiled dislike to the Feringhee seemed for the time to sleep. The two men

seldom came into contact with each other, Urquhart certainly striving to keep away from his enemy so as, if possible, to prevent an open breach. Afzul had been away on a border foray. It had always been an understood thing that when the tribesmen crossed the frontier, Urquhart should not go. They were then led by his subordinate, an Afridi of gigantic stature, and with a reputation for ferocity remarkable even among them.

Urquhart remarked on the return of the expedition that all was not harmony between him and his sub, Ferooz. There had been covert acts of insubordination, his manner occasionally bordered on insolence, and he had even been caught spying on his captain's movements. Urquhart had found that to keep any real hold on his men he must at least profess Mahomedanism, and conform outwardly to its rules. But the numerous minute observances which to an Islamite, through life-long practice and the instincts of heredity, had become second nature, were frequently overlooked by the new convert, whose heart was not in it, and whose attention was often "otherwhere." Ferooz's watchful eyes noted this, and he made these omissions the subject of discussion in the Hujras, where the men spent their leisure hours, lying on mats, smoking their long pipes, and gossiping. While he had been an acknowledged "infidel," Urquhart had escaped criticism, for the Afghan troubles

little about a professed unbeliever. It was since the Khan had asked him to, at least, outwardly submit to the rites of Mahomedanism that the danger had arisen.

Serafrauz, between whom and Urquhart no further words had passed, came to him one day to warn him that Ferooz meant mischief. Urquhart shrugged his shoulders with British contempt, but Serafrauz's seriousness impressed him nevertheless.

"Sahib, it is not Ferooz, it is Afzul."

"Afzul be d——d!" was the brief characteristic English reply.

"Ferooz is but the tool of Afzul, but he will kill thee if he can, and then Afzul will reward him. His skill with the jezail is known to all. In the fight thou art ever to the front; tempt him not with thy back as target." Urquhart flushed, but Serafrauz went on unheeding. "Young blood is hot, and thy path is difficult. Well, young man, I can say no more; but since thou art fearless at least be cautious."

But matters reached a climax. The carelessness of the unaccustomed proselyte became very evident. Ferooz, in the durbar, openly accused him of being an "uncircumcised dog and a deceiver, using his cloak of Mahomedanism to curry favour with the Khan." Afzul's scheme seemed likely to quickly bear unexpected fruit. Contrary to his usual fiery impetuosity, the danger now menacing the Englishman, and which

he fully realised, rendered him stoically calm and collected. Without even a quiver of the voice, he said slowly and very clearly :

“So! Thou sayest that I am an ‘uncircumcised dog’ and a ‘deceiver’! If thou art man enough to meet me, thou and I alone, I will prove to thee what I am.”

The men stood round, anxiety depicted on many a face, for the Feringhee captain was more popular than the sullen Afridi. They knew, too, Ferooz’s deadly skill with tulwar and charah, and their hearts failed them, for Urquhart had never shown special interest in the use of the blade.

The antagonists met at a lonely place on the hillside. Urquhart returned alone; and when parade was called a new lieutenant was appointed in the place of Ferooz. The mouths of cavillers were shut. No one took up the part of the candid critic left vacant by the absent Afridi.

CHAPTER XI.

MEANWHILE where was Zorayda? Urquhart's eyes turned often to the gallery corner, but the jealousies never moved now to emit a gleam as from the limpid clearness of a brown-bedded stream; no tinkle of armlets and faint jangle of sequins made music in the inner rooms of the gloomy Balla Hissar; no small snowy heap was to be seen beside the old chief on the tower in the dusk of the shortening evenings.

Urquhart sauntered now and then down to the forsaken burial-ground and wandered about watching with faint sarcasm the devotees on their praying-mats, their hands devoutly folded, and their eyes rolling inattentively about, just the same as he had seen in the crowded fashionable churches of his native land; but no silk-clad figure knelt among them, and, disgusted, he would turn away from the dismal place to stroll back up the road, speculating more perplexedly than ever about this tantalising disappearance. No shower of roses ever greeted him as he passed in under the arch, and the

flowerless aspect of his room, after its late luxuries, depressed him. It was dangerous for the warm-hearted young fellow, and had Zorayda only known it, she was acting with the finish of a consummate coquette. But Zorayda was far too innocent for that ; she was only hiding away from everyone, trying even to escape from herself and the knowledge that she loved the Feringhee.

The Khan had gauged his child's secret, and had been terribly distressed that such misfortune had befallen him. For in no other way could he view it. Union with the Feringhee could bring no blessing to his race nor advancement for his daughter. And all his thoughts and aspirations centred in Zorayda now. She herself had said little, fretting much over the restraint which had grown up between her father and herself. When he had spoken to her on the subject she had offered no resistance, only drawn her gossamer veil about her, and laid her head down on his knee as she knelt beside him.

"Thy will must be law to me ; only, father, let me rather die than marry me to Afzul. I did not know my own heart until it was too late. I did not understand such things, I had not thought about them until he came, but I think I loved him from the day I saw him first, sad and lonely among you all. He knows not my foolish heart, nor does he want it. Matto says that away beyond our mountains *he* loves.

Perhaps it is so, but *she* cannot love him as I do. Dear father, leave thy foolish Zorayda alone and—some day—after a while——” The small white figure glided from the room.

The proud old chief passed a night of conflict on the tower-top where he had spent many solitary watches before. The vastness of the heavens, with their twinkling worlds which never failed to appear in their appointed order, the solemn hush over the whole earth to

“Where Nature’s heart
Beat strong among the hills”—

“the hills that skirt the eternal frost,” whispered to him of an unerring, undeviating fate ruling over all. Their steadfastness soothed him to resignation.

When the Khan entered the audience hall next morning, Urquhart noticed the peculiar look which greeted him from the dark eyes where still remained the shadow that had fallen on them the day of his son’s death. The business of the morning despatched, the chief summoned Urquhart to his inner chamber. He told him in brief words that as he had made him his son by adoption, he now proposed to strengthen the tie by relationship—he offered him the hand of his daughter. For the second time Urquhart saw that hitherto unmoved composure broken. A quiver passed over the stern face, and the keen eyes watching him looked dim.

The Englishman was startled, and drew back at the realisation of the gulf this proposition sprung upon him. Acceptance of the offer meant a leap across that chasm whence there could be no foreseen return—separation from his native land, from father and from friend. And yet—what prospect did his own country offer him, a beggar with a spoilt career? That was a line of thought not satisfactory, and he shirked it at once with his habitual ease, and turned to the pressing one of the moment. It seemed so strangely vague and unreal, this proposal, like contemplating marriage with a white cloud, through which occasionally shone two lustrous stars.

Sundry slumbering reminiscences awoke—a vision of a fair face with golden hair, pouting lips, and rosy cheeks; unnoted by him, that vision had faded much of late, transplanted by a pair of midnight eyes from out a white mist. A glove? That glove had gone unheeded from him. A half-sweet, half-fretful voice saying, “No more kisses for a long, long time!” The words echoed but faintly now—another voice, wholly sweet, half-faltering drowned them: “For the sake of this poor heart?” That decided it—“this poor heart”—never poor again if he could make it rich. This too was Kismet—all was Kismet. Why not then take a possible chance of happiness as Kismet too?

Urquhart raised the old man's trembling

hands to his forehead—his first and only Oriental salaam.

“My father!” was all he said.

Urquhart married his bride according to the full Mahomedan rites, but with the unuttered resolution that as soon as “*this* performance is at an end, there’ll be no more show!”

He was too much absorbed in making his little bride happy to remember the sword that hung over the marriage feast. The trickle of blood on the lonely hillside must stretch into a river ere it dried up. When the ceremony was over, in defiance of Afghan custom, he bore his wife off alone with him for their chosen honeymoon to a castle on a sunny wind-sheltered plain in a distant corner of the Khan’s territory. The young soldier had carried his determination with true British masterfulness. He had won her from them all, and he meant to wear her according to his own Feringhee ideas.

The chains were linked about him now—two soft clinging arms folding about his neck, content to rest there whether he were rich or poor. He had married in a moment of reckless despair, dashing at fate in his impetuous way, never pausing to “count the cost.” He deemed his heart completely seared beyond all hope of resuscitation, and yet, unknown to himself, love had already sprung afresh to life, a tiny seedling growing all the hardier for the

early frost which had nipped its first budding growth.

The honeymoon, made sweet in that quiet beautiful valley by the passionate love of a woman who had neither the wisdom nor the power to hide her boundless worship, soothed the restlessness of his spirit. The great hills, reaching up their snow-capped peaks to the sky, seemed no longer prison walls shutting him in, rather impregnable fastnesses to keep away the cares and troubles of that outer tempestuous life from which he had escaped. But even honeymoons must wane. Urquhart returned to Khelat with his bride, and set up a home in the quarter of the citadel the Khan gave to the young couple, laying down a simple English mode of life which increased the wonder of the amazed Afghans. But Zorayda was content and happy, and that was all Urquhart cared for. She missed none of the idle luxuriousness of her former aimless life, being too absorbed in her new and delightful tasks of studying her husband and his foreign ways, trying to conform hers to them. Urquhart watched with flattered eyes the increasing depth and beauty of the radiant little face, and listened with amusement when he heard the low voice slowly struggling with the broken English she strove so hard to learn. Love is a quick teacher, and Zorayda was all love. Matto marvelled at the infatuation of her young mistress, for to her Urquhart was

ever the "white-faced Feringhee," to be slightly despised and much pitied.

All seemed peace at last. Afzul's enmity had apparently subsided, or was so carefully cloaked that Urquhart deemed it to be allayed, and in his new-found sense of rest he forgot the dark cloud that hung in the background of his Paradise. The Khan's enemies, and they were numerous as an upright nature must always have among baser surroundings, remarked with relief that the tulwar of the Feringhee gleamed less often to the front, and the erect martial figure of the guardsman was frequently absent from the durbars.

A whole year rolled its course through summer suns and winter snows, during which the little Afghan maiden entwined herself so closely round her husband's heart that, still unconsciously, he grew to love her with a strength and passion he did not know himself capable of. It was the hidden growth of a plant, silent and unnoticed, until something comes to us one day and we realise that a creeper has crept round our heart with deep roots and long, strong tendrils which can never be wrenched away without tearing us with it. It was an ideal picture of simple home life in the centre of that wild horde of warriors—a lull in Urquhart's storm-tossed life, *but*—it is the calm which presages the storm!

The final link to the chain was forged when,

lying in the mother's arms, the wee baby fingers of his son stretched out to grasp his tawny curling beard, pulling the tall head down towards them both, cooing his delight at his success.

It was a proud moment for the ageing Afghan chief when he held his grandson before him on his charger, and rode out one morning to present his heir to the assembled chiefs and warriors. A mighty shout and a simultaneous flash of bared tulwars hailed the announcement, as the Khan sat on his motionless horse and lifted the boy up in his arms that all might see the bonny child, with the bright blue Feringhee eyes peeping out beneath the thick dark curls.

"Ahmed the Second," as the proud father called him, could run about now in the citadel square, prattling his comical mixture of English and Pushtoo, picking up quaint foreign actions from his father, and learning gentle sweetness from his mother, whose beauty he largely inherited. Matto was getting too old now to stand the strain of exuberant babyhood, and Urquhart decided to select a bearer as companion for the child. While he was leisurely considering the step, Afzul returned from a protracted border foray. One of the band had been severely wounded, incapacitating him for future fighting. The hopeless dejection of the man stirred Urquhart's heart, always soft where weakness was concerned. He waited a little

to enquire into the man's character, then hired him as attendant for little Ahmed.

Serafrauz heard of the decision, and came to warn Urquhart. But he was met with the light-hearted laugh of confidence.

"Afzul has forgotten that old enmity, he has returned covered with glory, the lazy Feringhee is nowhere. Besides, that man is nothing to Azful. It will make the poor fellow happier to have employment, that is why I choose him."

"Thy heart is gold," said Serafrauz, sighing nevertheless; "but thou mayest trade too freely with thy gold. Allah protect thee, for thou wilt never do it thyself."

The broken-down hillman became devotion personified to his charge. He taught him many things, told him babbling stories, showed him the use of a toy tulwar and shield, and Urquhart was charmed with his choice, but Zorayda never took to the man. Perhaps she was a little jealous (there is no measuring a woman's heart where she loves!) that her boy so often openly showed preference for the companionship of rough nurse over gentle mother.

She was playing with her child one evening, waiting for her husband's return, when Matto came in. Her wrinkled face was more wrinkled than ever. She caught up the boy in her arms, gazing at him anxiously, pushing back his thick curls and feeling his little pulse.

"What is it, Matto? What wouldst thou?" demanded Zorayda, amazedly.

"Ah, my heart's best treasure, Matto is afraid." She set the child down on the floor and came towards Zorayda, fumbling about in the folds of her clothing. She drew out at last the bleached shoulder-blade of a sheep, and her crooked old fingers twisted it slowly round. Then she shook her head mysteriously, sighing lugubriously. "My star," she said, "trouble is foretold. My bone has never said me false yet, and I have read its signs for many a day. Trouble! Trouble!" she repeated to herself, shaking her head and crouching on the floor at Zorayda's feet.

"What!" cried Zorayda, "trouble here? Nay, speak not the word!" She seized her boy as he pranced past her, and pressed him passionately to her heart. "Go away, Matto, with thy croakings. Let not my husband hear thee frightening me."

The old woman looked reproach at her as she pushed away the gruesome object out of sight again. "Matto is no false prophet, and thou doest not well to scorn her warnings!" She hobbled away mumbling still.

Zorayda held her darling in her tight embrace as if she would hold him against the world, but the child wriggled impatiently and freed himself, eager to continue his interrupted game. The quick, superstitious nature of her race was roused

at the old creature's words, feign scepticism as she would. She felt depressed, yet how could anything come to dim such radiant happiness? No, no, Matto was a croaker; she would think no more of such follies, only wait for her husband, put the roses by his chair, think of how they two in a few minutes would laugh together over poor old Matto and her sheep bone. He would kiss away her fears, and have his romp with the wee one——

Crash! A box fell to the floor, the lid burst open, and the contents were strewn about. The child stood gleefully smiling in the centre of the havoc his fidgeting hands had wrought. Zorayda sat on the floor and carefully began to gather up the papers and to replace them. She had never seen inside that locked box before, though she had often watched her husband turning over its contents, and she had noticed that he was generally very quiet after such an inspection. The few letters and other documents in it were hieroglyphics to her. She was placing the papers back with reverent hands, lingering lovingly over what his hands had touched, when something arrested her attention; she paused, hesitated, and drew one out quickly from the others.

What was it? A picture! Zorayda had never seen a photograph before, and she gazed in wonder and admiration at the tinted portrait lying there on the palm of her small, brown

hand. A picture of a girl's head with sunny, golden curls, eyes of forget-me-not hue, skin like cream and roses. Fastened on to the foot of the card by a few clumsy stitches was a withered white rose, faded yellow now, but still exhaling that faint odour dried flowers never lose.

That was she! That was the girl away over the mountains whom he had loved, to whom he would one day go back when—when he had tired of Zorayda! Matto had said that day must come, that the heart of a Feringhee was like an eagle's, and could never be chained. Yes, he would go away through those dark passes whence he had come, back to that old life in which she had neither part nor lot, back to her—to that girl with hair like the sun, and eyes like the sky!

Oh, how frail was her hold upon him! Her weak hands would never be able to keep him when the restless spirit awoke once again, craving for a sight of the country of his people, for the sound of the long-unheard familiar tones. Ah, how beautiful were the maidens of that country, how wondrous fair! She looked at her own brown hands and arms, noting not their shapeliness, hating only their duskiness; she seized a mirror and stared at the reflection in it, then flung it from her, and burst into a tempest of tears.

The child's shout of delight at his father's entrance roused her. She quickly hid the picture

in her bosom, she must see it again, shook away the tears, and rose to greet him. His concern about the tumbled papers distracted his attention until he suddenly caught sight of the traces of grief on her face; then, thinking she was fretting over his slight show of annoyance, he bundled them into the box anyhow, never missing the photograph, eager only to comfort her. He soon won the sunshine back to her face, but the shadow was not so lightly chased from her heart.

A week later Urquhart returned, hot and tired, from the dusty parade ground. No ringing child voice was heard shouting about the citadel square. He flung off his poshteen and sought his wife. She sat on a divan by the open lattice, and her boy lay across her knee, his great blue eyes glittering above his crimson cheeks. The physician was summoned, and towards the cool of the evening the fever in his veins abated, and he rested, limp and white, in Urquhart's arms, while Zorayda sat beside, her head leaning wearily on her husband's shoulder. In a far corner of the room crouched the bearer, furtively watching them.

"He will die! He will die!" he kept muttering every now and then to himself. But Zorayda caught the words.

"Send him away, send him away! I cannot bear it!" cried the distracted mother.

Her wishes were obeyed, but before long he had stolen back again, and was squatting beside

the sleeping child, muttering and swaying to and fro, nor could any pressure keep him absent until Zorayda was fain to give in and submit to the curious devotion he betrayed. But some strange instinct made her shrink from, instead of appreciating, such love for her boy.

As each hot morning broke the fever returned, raged through the day, and subsided at night-fall, leaving the little sufferer at the day's close more and more exhausted and wasted. The Khan sent for the Ahkund, the child was tenderly carried down to the durbar, and there the priest performed his mysterious passes over the small motionless form. But of no avail. The child was borne back to his mother more weak and lifeless than ever.

A fortnight of terrible suspense dragged its length, and the once sturdy lovely limbs were but skeletons. The agonised parents were driven to appeal to Allah of his mercy to take their darling quickly and spare them some of this intolerable pain.

Then an evening came when Urquhart gathered his wife in his arms and held her there while she sobbed out her heart-broken despair upon his breast. They two were alone in their desolated home.

The sword over the marriage feast had broken its thread; that faint dark trickle on the hill-side was now a stream, swollen by infant blood and flowing over the threshold of the Feringhee.

CHAPTER XII.

THE silence of the place, where baby prattle and laughing shouts no longer greeted him, became for a time almost unendurable to Urquhart. His wife's mournful eyes too seemed to his disturbed mind to speak reproach at every glance. Was not his shadowed life casting its blight on her bright youth? So he would morbidly ask himself, and for answer seize her in his arms and hold her to him in an embrace that was almost fierce.

But the restlessness that began again to stir within him was not to be allayed, and once more Urquhart's band was headed by its captain. Fighting might distract him. He led his men with a reckless daring of consequence that surprised even them, pressing into the thick of every scrimmage, and dashing hither and thither with mad disregard of caution. Serafrauz guessed the bitter defiance of Fate which was spurring him on, and he feared. He knew that the child had died no ordinary death, but that

the stealthy hand of revenge had figured there; yet that tiny tribute would not pay the debt. Afzul's vengeance was like a fire, increasing in intensity as it is fueled.

It was at the end of a desperate *mêlée* that Serafrauz, fighting side by side with Urquhart, saw Afzul close in behind. Steadily he pushed nearer, until his outstretched arm could reach the Englishman's back. His eyes gleamed darkly with the exuberance of his hope, and his evil smile curled back his lips from his white teeth. He drew up his figure, paused, raised his tulwar, it flashed through the air, descended—and was met by steel. Serafrauz had caught it on his blade and struck it up.

"Fool!" he roared, "canst thou not distinguish friend from foe that thou wouldst slay the Khan's captain?"

Urquhart, half catching the fierce words, turned in time to see the expression on Afzul's face. The quick glance revealed to him in all its danger the hideous fate which threatened and must eventually overtake him. It was like a net closing about him on every side, entangling him in its noiseless meshes until there was no loophole of escape.

He laughed aloud in Afzul's face. "Not this time, Afridi!"

For himself he did not greatly care; life was a mistake the solution of which was erasion, but for Zorayda, his wife—for her sake he must be

warned. He was her life, the wellspring of her happiness, and for her he must live on.

When he went back to Khelat the shadow was over them both.

Almost unknown to herself, the fulfilment of Matto's prognostications was working upon the mind of Zorayda. If one thing came true, why not another? What might not happen next? She had dared to struggle against destiny and conquer it—but *had* she conquered? Winning and holding are different things. Matto had said she could not keep the Feringhee when his fettered spirit broke loose. Already she felt the weakening of the chain which kept her lover by her. One great link had given way when those baby fingers had slipped their hold. Could she suffice alone? No, no! Zorayda was too impregnated with the polygamic customs of her race to be able to comprehend the finer, more loyal, instincts of a Feringhee husband. Hence her despair.

Time passed, but instead of bringing soothing to the reroused spirit it only served to awaken in Urquhart a dull craving for what he knew not, only that the whole life he led was driving him mad by inches. The hopes and ambitions of his manhood could never be satisfied here, the constant forays grew sickening, and he turned from them with loathing; they offered no chance of advancement, they could never bring honour, fame, distinction, the craving for

which is inherent in the nature of every man who is worthy of the name. He was finding out that love is indeed "of man's life, a thing apart," and could never be his "whole existence." True love is the best spur a man can have in the battle for fame and glory, but love and ambition must go together like two rails laid down on the line; when they separate there generally follows havoc of the moral character.

Urquhart spent many hours studying to perfection the dialects of the country; he sought out travellers from neighbouring territories and learned from them the variations of the districts, he read their books, he studied their religions, he gleaned knowledge from his unfailing friend, the Khan, he did everything he could to drown the voice within him which cried aloud for liberty—and he failed.

Zorayda had grown very quiet of late. The numerous questions she had been wont to ask about that wonderful country of his were seldom heard now; she would sit beside him, try to understand his occupations, listen to every word which fell from his lips, watch him for hours, as if she were learning his varying expressions off by heart, one by one, but she spoke little.

Once he came in unexpectedly and caught her before her mirror. Matto was in attendance, and the two were so occupied that they did not hear his entrance until he was beside them. Zorayda snatched hastily at something

and he heard the lid of a box snap. He had noticed that small casket before ; she often toyed with it, it seemed to be a pet possession of hers. But astonishment at her changed aspect prevented his seeing her action now. Her veil and ornaments were off and lying about on the floor, and her long rich hair was fantastically coiled and twisted on her head in a strange new manner, like—— Great Scot ! Where had he last seen that coiffeur ? Where had she learned this new fashion ?

He burst out laughing. She started, looked at him in a frightened, pitiful way, blushed until the red blood showed through her dark cheek, and tried to drag the veil over her head.

“Don’t!” he cried, seizing her hands and gazing delightedly at her beauty, enhanced as it was by her confusion. He laughed again at the quaint spectacle she presented. But she, not understanding his mirth, drew away her hands and hid her face in them in a terror of shame at what she imagined was derision.

“I—I——” she faltered. “Ah, I thought I would try to be like thy Feringhee maidens—only—I am dark like night—and—and they are like the day. I can never, never be like them—I see it now !” Her voice broke and he saw a sob shake her.

“Zorayda, my love, thou art beautiful to me as thou art ! Do I not love thee ? Come, little one, thou art indeed foolish, let me see thee

smile and kiss me." He took her hands down with gentle force, framed her face in his, and kissed her tenderly on her quivering mouth.

The unsteady erection on her head tottered under such treatment, for it had been deftly built without the usual feminine mortar of hairpins, at best but unsafe cement, and in a moment a shower of dark hair fell over her shoulders like a mantle and swept across his encircling arm. She smiled through her tears as she yielded to his caresses. She would have smiled at his bidding if her limbs had been charring at the stake.

"But wilt thou not tell me how they look—what they do? I would make myself like them."

"God forbid!" he ejaculated fervently, remembering the empty heads and hearts those befrizzled erections often belonged to; then, recovering his lightness, he laughed again. "Ah, little one, it is beyond my powers to tell thee *how* a woman does a thing. She does it, that is all I know. No poor ignorant man could comprehend the mysteries of a woman's toilet. Nor would I wish thee to find out either—even if thou couldst. Thou canst never be like them."

He said the words in all heedlessness, but they were to her as a stab. "Never like them!" Did she not know that, did not the picture in her casket tell her so every time she

looked at it? She moved quietly away from him, gathered together some of her trinkets, took up her box.

"Come, Matto," she said listlessly, "and dress me."

The women left the room, and Urquhart stepped out on to the verandah and leaned over the rails musing. What did it all mean? There, like twin sisters before his puzzled mental sight, were two faces, one dark, the other fair, yet a strange resemblance between them. He started, passed his hand over his eyes—"Rose!" he gasped, half-aloud, and his face paled a little. How could Zorayda be like Rose? Was his memory failing him?

He strode back into the room, unlocked his box, the lid of which had been mended, and began a hurried search through his papers, his agitation increasing as the object he sought for did not come to light. The portrait of Rose was gone! The mystery of Zorayda's strange mood was solved—she had found it and had been trying to copy it.

"Good Lord!" he ejaculated. "What queer creatures women are! Is there no understanding them? How did Zorayda guess——"

He broke off and took up one or two of the letters, mere chits, yet how his heart had once throbbed against his ribs at the sight of that sprawling girlish scrawl. Again, in imagination, he saw the little dimpled hand which had

penned each word, the bewitching face with its coronet of sun-gilded plaits bending over the paper, breathing love, as he had fondly deemed, into each letter.

“Bah! I give it up. Lord God, what a toss-up life is! Love in one scale, money in the other. Love kicks the beam, and who takes count of a mere heart sent to the dogs or damnation through a girl's false face? Well, the bow-wows ought to ‘fare sumptuously every day’ if they like such scorned morsels. Who has bought and wears the White Rose of Peshawur? The highest bidder, I bet, be he black or white, foul or fair. *My* White Rose on another's breast—curse him! Yet why curse him, poor fool? Rather pity him for the d——d sell he'll have when the choice rosebud opens its petals and discloses only a black thorn to stab him with instead of a heart sweet to the core!”

He flung the papers back into the box, slammed down the lid, locked it, and left the place to saunter out through the bazaars and down to the Hujra. But the low gossip going on among the lazy loungers as they lolled on their sheepskins, drinking coffee and smoking, had no attraction for him, and he went back to the bazaars and chose out a broad gleaming flat band of gold from which hung finely-wrought sequins as an armlet for his wife's shapely brown arm. He smiled in anticipation

as he thought of the sweet kisses and shy words of thanks she would give him when he clasped on the pretty trinket and admired the slight indentation of the soft warm flesh.

The scene passed from his memory. Zo-rayda wore his gift, often fastening it as a coronet across her hair, and her dark eyes looked out from under it with the same depth of passionate worship in them; but those few thoughtless, unmeant words of his, forgotten as spoken, "Never like them!" twisted at every heart-beat like a dagger in the wound they had inflicted.

It was hopeless. Urquhart, sitting alone at the opening of his narrow tent on the slope of a hill, looked out over the stretch of jagged rocks, and despair seized him. He was out on a hawking expedition, but all pleasure was gone from everything now, the old keen instinct even of the sportsman was numbed. Nothing touched him, nothing roused him. He felt like one of those birds the relentless hawk had been tracking through the blue; though he might for a time evade the fatal swoop, it was but evasion.

A couple of nights before, Serafrauz, squatting beside him in the almost palpable darkness of a moonless night, had caught the faint sound of a stealthy tread, and his watchfulness had again averted a treacherous blow. It was only

postponed, Urquhart knew that. A blood feud had no end but one. Generations might pass away, but vengeance never until satisfied. Well, a man could die but once, but his pride shrank from *such* a death. He shuddered and buried his face in his hands. His nerve was gone, the constant facing of this horror was paralysing him. He looked moodily away to the dark line of the Khyber Pass. The sport had no pleasure for him, he felt too much in sympathy with the birds themselves. He would go back to Khelat to-morrow; at any rate his presence gave happiness to Zorayda, and that was something. He knew her twining arms of love were fetters binding him to death, but he had voluntarily stooped his neck to the bondage and he must pay the penalty. A man cannot sow at random and expect to reap profitably. But his wild oats had not been many,—surely the harvest had doubled in the growth?

CHAPTER XIII.

THE Khan and Urquhart sat together one evening on the citadel tower roof playing chess. Urquhart had been ignominiously beaten in the first game, he could not concentrate his thoughts. The return match got into foolish entanglement through his carelessness, and the Khan's hand swept the men impatiently from the board at last. Urquhart roused at the movement, and was shocked at the want of respect his abstraction had caused him to show towards the elder man. He began an apology, but the chief stopped him.

"My son," he said, "thy thoughts are not in the game. They are on a harder puzzle than chess. Perchance I can help thee to solve that puzzle."

"Thou?" Urquhart started quickly. He had striven to keep his hideous worries from his father-in-law.

"Yes, I. I have seen the dark cloud spreading. It must one day be the pall of death to thee, or else at once the cloud of separation

between us. Thou and I must part—must part,” he repeated to himself. His elbow was propped on the disordered chess-table, and he let his head sink into the palm of his hand.

“I do not understand. Thou and I can never part. My honour binds me to thee, if my devotion did not. Am I not thy son?”

“It is because thou art indeed my son by bonds more firm than those of kinship that I say to thee, Go.”

“I cannot, I will not leave thee!” urged the young soldier, the more strenuously in that he felt a sudden passionate throb of exultation surge through him from head to foot. Oh, once more to feel the delicious cool, damp wind of his island home blowing about him, to see his father’s face, to clasp the hand of comrade, to hear the bugle call of the old brigade!

The keen eyes watching the expressionful face caught that swift light, that kindling glow, and the old voice was slow and deep as it insisted—

“Thou must go. I must lose thee. There are two ways before thee, either leads away from here. One of them thou must choose.”

“Two ways? What wouldst thou say, father?”

The old man’s arm dropped heavily along the table, and his hand fell on Urquhart’s, fidgeting nervously with an exquisitely carved ivory castle.

"This," he said, looking penetratingly at him, "the two paths are these. One leads out through yon dark Pass"—he pointed with a slightly trembling finger out across the slope of mountains to the dark line of the Khyber—"the other——" he laid his hand on the jewelled handle of his charah. "Nay, silence, I would speak. It needed not Serafrauz to tell me of the treachery shown to thee on thy late excursion. I knew it must be, I know it *will be* until the blood feud thou hast started shall be settled with thy life. Afzul has taken up that feud, not because of kinship, but as an excuse to work thy death. An Afghan cannot forgive, but an Afghan of the Afghans knows only open revenge. Afzul is an Afridi—thou canst not escape him, nor can my power defend thee. *Thou must go.*"

"Go! Flee before an Afridi!" Urquhart sprang up, his British blood boiling within him. "I cannot! I will die, but I will not run away."

"Nor would I ask thee to do so," said the old man, his unmoved calm contrasting sharply with the other's violent agitation, "if it were possible for thee to defend thyself. But it is impossible. Afzul means to deal treacherously by thee. Has not he stabbed thee through thy son? I thought"—the old voice broke, and the Khan's head sank again on his hand—"I hoped when he took the life of thy child—my heir—that would suffice, but——"

"What!" roared Urquhart, the full horror of that blow striking him for the first time. "My son was *murdered*! He did not die by the hand of Allah! Father, what is this?"

"Didst thou not guess? That work was Afzul's. Didst thou imagine that he would let *thy* offspring be my heir, grow up to be a chief in Khelat? Truly, thou dost not know the Afridi, my son. Nor has his work ceased. He means to put thee through the tortures of hell ere he gives thee the final stab of all. Thou didst cross his path at a spot which no man, even the best of us, can tamely endure."

"Great God! Can such fiends live and be Thy handiwork? Then would I indeed escape this hell on earth."

He sat again upon his stool, flung his arms out across the table, and buried his head in them. Silence and darkness fell between the two. The waters of the same chill river lapped the feet of both, for youth and age together go down into its depths, and often the former is the one to welcome the more eagerly its icy touch, which brings the craved-for sleep "after life's fitful fever." Urquhart looked up at last, his face drawn and old; the last spark of youthful buoyancy had faded from it for ever.

"Thou hast forgotten—there is Zorayda."

"I have not forgotten, my son,—there is Zorayda. Thou canst not take her with thee, escape then would indeed be impossible."

"But I cannot leave her—she loves me."

"Ay, she loves thee, never doubt that. But her old father loves her too, and," he added, with swift jealousy, "she loves her father. Before thou didst cross her path I sufficed; some day—youth forgets easily—I may suffice again. When I tell her her love means death to thee, she will let thee go. And I will take her back to these old arms and comfort her. We will together cherish the memory of the Feringhee whom we both loved so well that to save his life we gave him up. Fear not for Zorayda. When thou art gone she will be safe with me. While thou remainest here, thou dost place *her* life—nay, more than that, her *honour*—in peril too."

"My God, this is too much!" Urquhart's head sank again on to his arms, and the old man sat motionless, his breath almost suspended with the keenness of the suspense. He had laid this temptation as a test, would it prove too strong? Would the Feringhee's courage fail him in the final hour? What if he should look up, say he would take his offered release, go, and leave the rest to Kismet?

The Afghan's brow darkened. Urquhart's departure meant disgrace for Zorayda worse than widowhood, even which was disgrace enough, but to be cast off—left—the thought was torture.

"Father!" The young fellow's quiet voice

interrupted the bitter meditation. "Thou art good and generous, and I see what thou art willing to face for me. But it shall not be. I will never leave Zorayda. It would ruin her life; thou couldst never make up to her for that disgraced widowhood. If Allah wills that she *should* be my widow, that is in Allah's hands, but I will not go. I will do all thou shouldst think wise, I will act with double caution, even go away for a time if that be wise and may render my life less in peril when I return, but forsake Zorayda—never!"

"The Great Prophet be praised indeed for the son he has given me!" burst out the Khan with fervour. "I will not try to influence thee, it is more than my strength could do. But I have a suggestion to make. I withheld it until I had proved that thou wert truly upright. Tomorrow at dawn a pilgrimage starts for Mecca. Wilt thou join it? That will ensure thy future safety; thou wilt then indeed be one of us, and no man dare raise hand to harm a Hadji. Think well before thou answerest."

But that was just what Urquhart dared not trust himself to do; few have courage to toy with the knife that they destine for their own throat. It was the final severance of the old life; if he meant to cut that last rope he must do it without reflection, it must be done at one swoop with shut eyes and clenched teeth, not cut strand by strand. He gave one quick gasp,

one swift glance all round, saw only about him the heavy shadows of night with not one bright star to twinkle hope and light to him, then he stood up.

"To-morrow, my father, at dawn, I will go this pilgrimage. I will be with thee an hour before they start. Wilt thou see that all is ready for me? Now I would leave thee. I will go to—to Zorayda. If she sleeps should I wake her?"

"Nay, let the child sleep. It will make it easier for thee and for her. To-morrow, when thou art gone, will be time enough for her to know. Now go. Put all dark thoughts from thee; thou art young and life holds much for thee."

Urquhart obeyed, and the old Afghan was alone with his unfailing comforters, the stars. But the heavens were a black pall over him that night, and never a star appeared to break its oppressive denseness.

Urquhart pushed aside the thick folds of the curtain in the entrance and passed through into his wife's room. It was very quiet and but dimly lighted by a lamp of curiously wrought copper suspended from the ceiling. The further end of the room was in complete shadow. He walked softly forward, his footfall giving back no sound from the rich rugs scattered about. As he paused in the gleam of light from the lamp his face showed set and colourless; the agi-

tation he had displayed in his interview with the Khan had died down, superseded by an intense calm. He did not feel to be himself; power of realisation seemed to have gone from him; he was more like some automaton working by machinery he had nothing to do with and no control over. He looked round in an uninterested manner on the things as if they were all of no moment to him, as if he had strayed into some unknown place and were taking a cursory survey of the objects. The familiar possessions about him wore another aspect; the silence, too, was unbearable, the shadows touched him with their gloom, they oppressed him, choked him, he would stifle. He went hastily across and out on to the verandah. Darkness and gloom met him again.

God! How lonely it was, how desperately lonely it always was, all these long years. Would it always be like this, would he never lose this cut-off feeling, this awful ache for comradeship? The passionate agony of nostalgia was on him again, and he writhed in its throes. He flung himself face downwards on the mat on the floor of the verandah and buried his face in his crossed arms. When he rose from that long fight he had gone through the horrors of dissolution, and was yet alive to live on and feel.

He went back into the room. The time was short now, only one hour and all would be over.

He wandered round the place, lighting lamps everywhere; the shadowy dimness drove him frantic. A mirror lying on a table caught the glimmer of a tiny lamp and gleamed out. He picked the glass up, held it before himself and stared hard. Then he gave vent to a mirthless laugh full of bitter mockery, horrible to hear from one so young.

"Richard Urquhart, late lieutenant in Her Majesty's Rifle Brigade for the last time. Tomorrow, an Afghan, a Mahomedan, a Hadji to the holy shrine at Mecca! Lord God, what a superb jest life is!"

The room was a blaze of illumination now. It might have been the hour of festivity, not the moment of despair. Across one corner was another arch also heavily draped by double curtains, which met in the centre. One of these was slightly caught back, and beyond could be seen a subdued gleam. Urquhart went towards it.

"Shall I waken her, or shall I let her sleep on until I am gone?"

He softly approached the bed where Zorayda lay and stood watching her. How beautiful she looked in the abandon of sleep, how young! She was but a child yet. The small face was very peaceful; the sadness of the eyes with the look of robbed motherhood they often wore were veiled now by the long fringed lids, the rich lips faintly parted and the dimpled chin turned up-

wards. Neck and bosom were partially uncovered, and they rose and fell gently to the regular breathing. One arm was thrown out across the pillow and the heavy bangles hung loosely on the little brown wrist. He stooped lower over her until his face nearly touched hers, and let her soft breath fan him. No, he would not wake her, it would be a shame, she looked so calm, so happy, so perfectly at rest. So might she lie for hours yet, why rob her of those moments of peace which would be putting miles of separation between her and him?

His lips just swept each eyelid and lingered for a second's space above her beautiful mouth, but he did not dare to kiss her. He had not a moment to spare. He moved away, the curtains fell to behind him. He blinked in the glare of the outer room, went quickly round, extinguished every light, twisted up his turban, took up his poshteen, and the next moment the room was still and dark again as if no intruder upon its quietness had been there.

CHAPTER XIV.

“O-o-oh!” A long pause, free and undisguised, and the sort one only dare give vent to in the bosom of one’s family, then another unchecked “O-oh!”

“Did you speak, dear? What is it?”

“Nothing!” with impatience.

“Nothing? That’s all right, I feared you were in pain.”

“Pain! Your one idea of feeling is *pain*! That comes of being such a gouty old thing and having a liver.” The words were rude, the tone, if possible, ruder, and yet the voice was sweet enough to have been Annie Laurie’s. “Do you think people don’t say ‘Oh’ over other things besides pain? I think that if they had added *boredom* to the exciting ‘battle, murder, and sudden death’ list in the Litany—it *is* in the Litany, isn’t it, or somewhere in the Prayer Book?—the ‘Good Lord, deliver us!’ would often have been more fervently said. I believe I’d have found energy enough to go to church for the express purpose of kneeling down and

shouting that prayer. Oh yes, I'd shout it if that would do any more good! This day has been simply unendurable; but then, nearly all days are."

"Rose, my love, isn't that—er—slightly—just a little, dear, irreverent?"

"Probably, just as you look at it; it's much too hot to be particular. And for goodness' sake don't interlard your sentences with so many terms of affection—just as if we were fond of each other."

There was a silence after that conjugal speech. Another yawn as obtrusive as the last and even more prolonged; then—

"Good Heavens, John, what could have bewitched you to start a fit of gout just at this time of all others! This insane gout of yours is always making itself a nuisance, but *now*! Keeping us bottled up here in this dead-alive hotel, swarming with obnoxious tourists and cross men on sick leave, who haven't even an eye for a pretty woman when there is one to be seen, when we might have been half way to England by now. I shall lose all the best of the season if you go on like this. How much longer are you going to be tied by the leg do you think?" She cast a jeering little smile at the swathed, unsightly foot of her spouse where it lay carefully propped up on a pillow on a chair.

"My dear, how can I tell? Do you suppose

I thus inflict myself voluntarily? If once you had just one twinge like I endured for hours yesterday, you would understand."

"Oh, thanks, I prefer you to keep that to your own understandings. That's an attempt at a pun, I do believe, only, for Heaven's sake, don't be amused, or you might laugh and shake yourself and bring on a twinge! John!" bursting out a little louder as if something very important had suddenly struck her, and making her husband jump nervously, "do try for the future not to make such grimaces over the endurance of those 'twinges.' I really must lend you my hand-glass for you to see yourself in. It might be a distraction for you during the paroxysms. Beauty never was your strong point at the best of times, even before you started such a patent liver and gout, but now, when there is a twinge, as Captain Scott says, 'Good Lord!'"

The speaker put a morsel of lace before her mouth and laughed unreservedly behind it. Backwards and forwards went the rocking-chair, crunch, crunch, scrape, scrape went the rockers on the gritty verandah. The invalid put his hand up to his head, sighed a little pathetically, but said nothing. Perhaps he knew the consequences of "eternal grumbling," having tried it before without effect. His nerves were as painful to bear as his gout, even worse, for they never subsided, while the gout did have spells of peace as well as torment.

"Wouldn't you like something to do, de—h'm, Rose?"

"Decidedly, if there were anything to do."

"Why didn't you accept Mrs. Caryll's invitation just now to ride with her and her husband?"

"Ride on an evening like this? John, are you quite mad as well as gouty and liverish? Did you *see* her?"

"Of course I did, dear—I mean, Rose. How could I help it, when she waited here at the verandah while I sent for you?"

"If you saw her, I should have thought that was quite enough to show you what an utterly idiotic idea it was to suggest that I *rode*. Do you suppose I'd appear on horseback at the risk of making myself look like her? I'd sooner sit in a dark room all day with you and 'twinges.' She looked more like a boiled lobster or a full-blown peony than a decent woman. Not I, faith! I consider she outraged the proprieties to a horrible extent. No woman has a right to make herself look so hideous, it suggests possibilities to the mind of man about the whole sex, that ought never to be given to them. Ride, indeed! John, you are mad!"

"Well, dear, there is driving. If you had expressed a wish, as I really am better this evening, I would have tried to accompany you for a little time."

"Oh, thanks, *dear*, you are very kind,"

with a very sweet smile, perhaps a little too sweet to accompany the words being spoken, "but I hardly think that mode of passing the evening could be called enjoyment. I think it is as good here watching the other fools as joining in myself and swelling the mob at the risk of sunstroke or ruining my complexion. I don't mean to do that at the last moment, after so carefully taking care of it all these years. I mean to let them see at home that we haven't all got that 'dingy yellow' skin they credit us with out here. I bet I can pass with the best of them," and she smoothed one peach-down cheek with complacency. "Go to sleep, John, and leave me to myself."

"Sleep is out of the question, though I did feel a little drowsy once, but your chair ——"

"Oh, my chair, is it? Well, I'll leave you my chair and go and sit round the corner on the other side. That overlooks the road. Ta-ta! Wouldn't you like another lemon squash? No? Well, you know best, but I thought men's capacities were as big as reservoirs when drinks were about. I'll send the mirror along presently. Come, Nipper, you lazy little beast, wake up! I wish to heaven you'd choose some other mat than the frills of my skirt; you crush every petticoat I have!"

The fat spoilt fox terrier lying at her feet rose lazily at her call and waddled away beside her. She waved her hand to her husband, but the

tender attention was wasted, for he was busily adjusting a big silk handkerchief to the shiny top of his head. So she smiled again a little satirically, shook out her thin, gauzy draperies, and vanished to the spot which "overlooks the road," the dog flumping slowly along with a dejected air.

The early blaze of heat had died down, it is true, but the gentle breeze which swept across the sea had not yet cooled the oven-like temperature of the streets of Bombay. Nevertheless, the road was alive, and a scene of much activity, though few of the faces of the passers-by showed the faintest spark of anything beyond passive endurance. Enjoyment spoke nowhere, that was almost out of the question with the thermometer at 100° and odd. Languid Europeans rode limp and white on their Gulf Arabs, which looked about as lazy as their riders, for when not excited, an Arab horse is a slug. The lean, lithe syces, following behind in their spotless white cloths, contrasting with the peeps of black supple limbs, looked more alive than masters or horses, as they flicked away the flies with huge white chowries. English ladies, pale and inert, often faded and irritable, though still in *première jeunesse*, lolled back in their open barouches, trying "to eat the air," of which there was such a scant supply. Their would-be imitators, the wealthy Parsees, in tall sloping hats, bowled along wheel to wheel beside them, while

itinerant box-wallahs and natives of sorts, with here and there a half-caste dandy of a clerk, or a Tommy Atkins in white helmet and khaki clothing, all the swagger melted out of him and even the flourish from his ubiquitous little cane, swelled the crowd and added diversity to the kaleidoscopic scene.

The fair watcher from her "box" forgot her *civility* in her interest over the shifting panorama. She nodded now and then to an acquaintance, waved her hand to a couple of men on horseback, who showed signs of reining in until checked by the snubbing way the beautiful head turned from them, when they passed limply on. A broad smile flitted over her face, and a hearty outspoken "Thank Heaven I was born with a sense of the fitness of things!" as Mrs. Caryll's peony countenance burned upon her with fervid glow. She was making energetic signs of some sort, but the lady on the verandah, by a quick, judicious movement, put the tall statue in the centre of the way between them, and evaded further tokens of recognition.

Three men, two of them soldiers by their bearing and general air of alertness, sauntered out on to the steps of the hotel and stood chatting together under the wide porch.

"Dash it all! it's too much of a glare for me to face. If only one could cask up this confounded ceaseless sunlight and let it out to order over there among the fogs and general

grime what a fortune one might make! Let's stay here and have something to drink, it's all one can do this weather."

"You are a fish, Lanyon! How many sodas have you had to-day already?"

"No need for me to keep count, couldn't if I tried," was the laughing reply; "it's all chalked up there, you bet, and a few thrown in just to show no ill-will," and he nodded his head backwards in the direction of the hotel. "Come on, sit down here, and I'll stand you both. Don't leave a chap alone," he added plaintively, as the others still stood as if to descend the steps.

They yielded to his solicitations, it was too hot to do anything else, and they sat round a little table at the end of the verandah "that overlooks the road," but close to the porch of the entrance. They too watched the throng in listless, half-interested fashion, ejaculating a remark now and then between the puffs at their cheroots.

Down through the crowd came a quartette of Afghans, striding along oblivious of the heat, with the free swinging gait of mountaineers bred and born, their blue turbans round the red-peaked caps affording an artistic touch of colour that attracted Lanyon's eye at once.

"Fine fellows, aren't they? Afghans, I suppose. What are they doing here?"

"On a pilgrimage, I fancy. Come down for

the steamer to get on to Mecca. Isn't that where they go? The holy shrine or something of that ilk. A kind of peas-in-the-shoes dodge, eh? Gad! they must find it a trifle hot in that fantastic garb, poor devils! One would have thought they would have stuck to something a little more primeval, fig leaf business, don't you know?"

In spite of the heat of sultry Hindostan after their own fresh hill air, they still wore their stout sleeveless poshteens over their cotton garments. Their eyes were wide and active in wonder and undisguised admiration at the white lovely houris rolling past. The sahibs on horseback they knew; for all they looked so limp, they had seen how they could fight. They would fain have despised little "Tommy" mentally, as they looked down upon him physically, but the stories told by kindred tribesmen rankled in their memories, and forbade disparagement of the small white soldier. They put, therefore, the greater contempt into the full stare at the native Bombay sepoy as he passed. Their gaze roamed fascinated over the splendid palaces of trade and administration, and the cry of Blucher must surely have risen in Pushtoo to their lips, "God, what a city to loot!"

The tallest of the four sauntered laggingly behind. He had a different aspect from the others. His face was fairer, fair enough to be

an English one, for the red tinged the sunburnt cheek and brow, and the curling golden-brown beard was unstained by henna. He looked altogether too clean, too well-finished for an Afghan; as Lanyon put it, "That last chap looks a cut above the others." His blue eyes, half moody, wholly sad, took small note of the throng about him. He stalked along, his high head well in the air, and a settled sort of resignation about him which was strangely belied by the bitter droop of the fine mouth and the proud quiver of the nostrils.

On they came with their steady swing. The first three passed the wide porch of the hotel with scarce a glance into its shadowy depths. Half a minute later and the tall traveller to Mecca was at the foot of the steps. At that instant a hearty, English, boyish laugh rang out, accompanying the words:

"By Jove, Lanyon, another B. and S.! We'll have to fetch a stretcher soon, old chap!"

The lady at the farther end of the verandah looked up with faint surprise that anyone could be found equal to the exertion of a laugh in such an oven. The blue-turbaned head of the big Afghan turned too at the sound, the gloomy eyes lit up with a sudden flash of excitement like the glitter of drawn steel, the calm face quivered all over, the steps slackened speed, halted, and the next moment he had bounded up the shallow flight, and in a voice, hoarse

with overwhelming emotion, he shouted, first in Pushtoo, his cultivated Orientalism yet clinging to him :

“In the name of Allah, the compassionate ”—but breaking off into an agonised English, “For God’s sake, give me a brandy and soda !”

He seized the foaming tumbler ere Lanyon’s hand could take it from the bearer’s tray, and poured it down his throat, never pausing until the last drop was drained. Then he set the glass down.

The men had risen in their amazement, and were staring at the intruder in speechless alarm. Had some stark mad fanatic rushed in among them ? The whole scene had come upon them so quickly that no outside notice had been attracted. The Afghan still stood motionless as a statue, the slow colour deepening and staining his face crimson. One hand rested on the little marble-topped table, the other hung nervelessly beside him. No one moved, no one spoke. Lanyon looked at Henderson. He was never known to fail as spokesman, but he looked an utter fool now in his helpless surprise.

The occupant of the end of the verandah had heard the cry, the strange wild words ; had caught the scraping of chairs being pushed back as the sitters had sprung with one accord to their feet, and uncontrollable curiosity drew her forward towards them. She paused at a little distance away and surveyed the group, trying

to solve the mystery of those hypnotised figures. Then her gaze travelled on to the intruder. She lifted her lovely long-fringed lids and her eyes met his full; blue eyes looked down into bluer ones, her bosom heaved spasmodically in gasps for breath, her form swayed slightly, and she put out her hand for support. As curious a change was working on the Afghan; the flush of red had receded from his face, he was shivering from head to foot as with ague.

Nipper, fat, puffing, and barrel-bodied, stalked majestically to the front to investigate for himself the cause of this alarming display of energy on the part of his mistress. Then he, too, was seized with some strange metamorphosis. His ears cocked up, the one staying erect, the other flopping over with its usual unstarched tendency; his stump of a tail wagged as it had not wagged for many a long day, he gave utterance to a sort of bark, growl, howl of delirious joy, all blending into one unearthly noise, and dashed straight at the new-comer, springing up his body and nearly rending his tight little carcase in the wild exuberance of his greeting. Come back at last! Was ever dog so happy?

"Nipper, Nipper, down, sir!" ordered his mistress, fearing nothing short of sudden hydrophobia.

"My God, it *is*! Rose——"

Crash! Before one of the dumbfounded bystanders could put out an arm to stop him,

the Afghan had fallen his full length along the stone terrace of the verandah. His turban fell off and rolled across the floor, uncoiling itself like a blue sinuous snake, at the feet of the woman standing gasping there. The dog was flying round and round, jumping on him, barking, howling, licking his face, simply off his head altogether, and making mad dashes at Lanyon or Henderson as if to wake them up to a sense of their duty.

The lady had sunk white and faint on to a seat against the wall of the hotel. A flickering palm threw a green mottled shade over her half-unconscious face, and hobbling round the corner on crutches came the victim of gout to seek his wife.

CHAPTER XV.

"I SAID so ! I have always told her that would be the end of him !" wailed the querulous voice of the frightened invalid as he hobbled painfully up to them. "I always knew he would have hydrophobia. What has he done ? Oh dear, oh dear, this is very distressing ! Pull him off, somebody !" And he looked appealingly at the young fellows standing helplessly by. "Oh, Rose, my love !" He turned now to his wife. "Don't faint ; there is no need of such extreme agitation. Dear, dear, why did I trust you out of my sight ! Kitmutghar, I say, kitmutghar, fetch the memsahib's ayah at once."

The furious barking of the dog had at last roused some degree of attention. A half-caste clerk, with greasy black hair, a chaprassie in gorgeous scarlet and gold, and with a belt clasp as big as a young doctor's door-plate, appeared upon the scene, but seemed incapable of doing more than rush out and stand staring, dodging well out of the way of the dog's circuits.

Meanwhile, the prostrate Afghan moved and

showed signs of returning life. Nipper licked his face more vigorously and assisted reviving Nature to the best of his dog ability. The men awoke then to the fact that they were not displaying the presence of mind expected of John Bull.

"Fetch some water, and don't stand there gaping like a stuck pig," ordered Lanyon to a coolie, and speaking with curt snappishness, as if by so doing he shifted his own lack of presence of mind on to someone else.

Henderson went over to the gouty one. "Shall I carry the lady inside?" he asked politely.

But as if for answer, a quiver passed over her face, and she opened her eyes. They wandered wildly round in search of something other than the fat, lemon-coloured, clean-shaved face of her alarmed husband, who was bending over her.

"That's right, my dear; make an effort and rouse yourself! The dog isn't mad at all, and there's no harm done. Here, Nipper, come to your mistress!"

"Where is he?"

"He's close by," assured her husband, applying the pronoun to the wrong object.

She took no notice of the answer, but started up and passed her hand over her misty eyes. Then she ventured to take a step forward; her foot trod on something soft and yielding. It was the end of the blue snake, reaching from her to the stranger.

“Ah!” she gasped and shuddered.

“Here is the ayah, my dear,” went on the fussy marital voice beside her; “lean on her and come away to our apartments,” he pleaded, his British reserve rising strongly in revolt at the publicity to which she was subjecting herself.

But the woman either did not hear, or if she did, heeded not. Passing by the men, she went towards the Afghan, who was now sitting up and drinking some more brandy Lanyon had just administered.

She stooped towards him. “Can it be—oh, God, is it possible? Back from the dead, alive! Alive! Dick! Dick!”

Like a rush of pure mountain air, the tones of her voice brought life and strength to him. He sprang to his feet, swayed, steadied himself, and confronted her. Nearer and nearer they drew the one to the other, her eyes cleaving to his face until in the wild, dark, dilated pupils, he saw himself reflected. An infinite depth of yearning passion filled them. The magnetism of that gaze enthralled him; he stood fascinated, surroundings all forgotten, unable to speak, powerless to break the spell. He tried to utter her name, but his throat was dry, and no sound came. Oblivious of all but that woman's matchless beauty of face he stood, until a heavy hand was laid upon his shoulder and a voice hissed in his ear:

“Dog of an infidel! What dost thou mean?”

Shocked back to realisation at the rough words, the Afghan swung round and faced his apparent kinsman, his fist clenching, and his eyes glittering ominously.

“Take your hands off, or I will strike you to the ground, you blackguard!” he roared, and raised his arm to put into effect his threat.

The man slunk back to his comrades on the steps, not having understood the English, but catching the defensive movement on the part of the young fellows standing round, still watching in puzzled amazement.

“Wine-bibbing son of a Feringhee, may the Prophet’s curse rest on thee and thy people for thy faithlessness!” he hissed from the safety of the steps, and with unutterable contempt.

His evil face was black with menace, and his bony, dirty fingers began to pluck at his belt for his charah. It was not there; he was not in his lawless mountain home, but in the guarded streets of an English city, where weapons might not be carried and used *ad libitum*. A low curse escaped him as he fumbled vainly about, the other watching him with calm superciliousness the while, not a tremor betraying that he felt one qualm of anxiety, though he knew he had no means of defence beyond his fists, and they felt weak and nerveless from the strain of the situation.

He put his hand in an old, nearly-forgotten

habit over the front of his released, crisp, brown curls. At the action, which was evidently familiar, the woman watching him, drinking in with passionate eyes of love every lineament of the haggard but still comely face, flushed violently, no becoming pink tinge, but a perfect flood of crimson, over brow, and ears, and neck. Then she saw the diabolical thirst for vengeance on the countenance of the man in the rear, and fear of consequences possessed her to the exclusion of all else. She darted between them with a wild cry of terror.

"Send him away, some of you! He will do harm!" She flung herself across the Afghan's breast, clinging to him, striving to make her slight form and arms a covering shield from what she imagined would be a death-blow. Hysterical sobs shook her from head to foot, and the man felt her leaning more heavily on him as the weak arms began to slip feebly away.

The Englishmen, seeing there was real likelihood of something serious taking place, deemed it time to interfere peremptorily on behalf of one who was evidently a countryman. Henderson advanced on the blood-thirsty Afridi, whose twitching fingers still sought for the weapon for assault or defence, according as to how affairs turned.

"Clear out of this, you devil-faced fool, or I'll show you a speedy way to do it!" he roared,

driving the man back inch by inch to the head of the flight of steps, from which he had again pushed forward.

His comrades from below began a loud string of Pushtoo, plentifully interlarded with curses, maledictions, and violent gesticulations. As he came down the steps to join them they heard him mutter :

“Dog, we always knew thee false at heart ! Stay with thy Feringhee folk and trouble us no more with thy white-livered face. And thou wouldst be a Hadji ! Haha !” And the hideous jeer rang out.

They turned away, the defeated one looking sullenly back over his shoulder for a final fling.

“Faithless dog ! And yet, by the beard of the Great Prophet, I also would forfeit His paradise for one hour in the arms of that white-houri !”

The trio strode away, the blue turbans showing out for many minutes above the crowd about them until lost in the hazy air of the broiling street.

As Urquhart (for all must know who it is) turned back from watching them, a spasm of uncontrollable fear crossed his face, followed by sudden giddiness. He had eaten little food for many days, and that of the poorest, and he had travelled incessantly. Even when supposed to be taking his allowanced rest, his active thoughts had given him no respite, and now outraged

nature was rebelliously refusing to submit to such violation of her laws without some assertion of herself. He reeled awkwardly, and fell against the stone balustrade, the woman's clinging form slipping away as she turned to hide her shamed face on her ayah's shoulder.

"Gad, the chap's off again!" said Henderson, "This must be put a stop to somehow. Sir—Mr. Elliott—" he had a brief hotel acquaintance-ship with him, "will not you take Mrs. Elliott indoors? This scene has upset her, she is not herself in all this alarm and confusion."

"Yes, yes, certainly, sir; this is what I have wished all along, but, you see," pausing helplessly, "I can't help her, d—n it all!" and he writhed as he gave his offending limb an involuntary jerk.

Lanyon saw his dilemma, advanced promptly, and with perfect *sang froid*, as if assisting fainting ladies were his daily vocation, put his arm round Mrs. Elliott's waist, motioned to the ayah to follow, and in a very brief space of time he had the bewildered lady, who was hardly accustomed to such masterly treatment, on a couch in the cool shady drawing-room, where he left her to the fussy ministrations of her husband and ayah. Then he went back to the verandah.

"What a — h'm! amazing nuisance women can make of themselves to be sure when they have a mind for a scene! I wonder what all the hubbub means, and who the fellow is! It's too

doosid hot for much of this kind of thing, even with unlimited sodas!" and Lanyon wiped his face and neck with his handkerchief. "Phew! It's too insufferable! Sensational drama was not meant for the tropics. He's about as much an Afghan as I am, despite his blue snake and gibberish! Uncommon awkward, the wife coming on like that, and hard on the old chap. He took it very well, though, by Jove! he didn't relish it! I always thought he was the right sort, though he is such an ugly, clumsy old beggar. Well, how is he?" This last to Henderson and Brooke, who had heretofore displayed his renowned silence to great advantage. He never could do or say a thing when "a petticoat" was about, but the moment the last flutter of Mrs. Elliott's skirts had been seen, he had promptly begun a struggle with the heavy leathern poshteen.

"No wonder the poor beggar is bowled over! It's as bad as that shirt someone gave somebody to kill them with!" and he gave another tug at it.

"Hold hard! Do you want to throttle a man?" Urquhart sat up and rubbed his eyes vaguely. "Confound it all, what an infernal mess I'm in!"

"Have another brandy and soda; nothing like it when you feel like that," suggested Lanyon promptly. Urquhart was looking wildly about. "All right, don't agitate yourself," Lanyon went

on, "the old chap's got her off quietly. "What does it all mean? Who the deuce are you, I say?"

"It means that I— I— I'm a Hadji, a pilgrim, don't you know, ha, ha!" A mad laugh broke the sentence. "An Afghan, can't you see, a Mahomedan. A fellow gets a bit off his head when he's a Hadji."

"By Gad, he does!" ejaculated Brooke aside, and winking broadly at Henderson.

Urquhart put up his hand again to his hair, and felt about curiously as if he expected to find the top of his head blown off at the least. Red cap and turban gone! He looked bewildered, almost demented, perhaps it was all some mad dream, only one of the many he had had of late, and they had taken his turban to give him the coveted green one instead. But no! His gleaming eyes, rolling incessantly in a feverish glitter, lighted on the blue cotton snake lying on the floor in picturesque contortions, as it had been caught and tripped over by feet. He burst into another jeering cackle, which died away into something almost like a sob. His head drooped on his breast, the wild light died out of the blue eyes, and the face went livid and hopeless.

"There's something uncommon wrong here, the fellow's hipped, and no mistake!" said Henderson. "Look here, old chap," he laid his hand on Urquhart's shoulder and shook it, "rouse

yourself, I don't know who you are from Adam ; it's enough for me you're English, so come along to our quarters. The people will be coming in soon, and there'll be a devil of a fuss. No need to attract attention. It's not safe either for you here ; those blood-and-thunder-looking comrades of yours may return with a contingent, and there'd be the piper to pay all round. Let's clear out."

Urquhart was on his legs by now. "It's awfully good of you. I'll explain all directly—it's this confounded head of mine won't keep straight!" He staggered again as he spoke and seized Lanyon's arm to steady himself.

Emboldened by the lull, the inquisitive clerk who had kept up a constant fire of peeping, now popped bodily round the doorway.

"I say, Mr. — Afghan — Sahib!" he corrected quickly, noting Urquhart's recovered strength, "hadn't you better go to the—— Well, our establishment is not meant to accommodate pilg—ah, that is to say, native gentlemen. Would you kindly leave the premises quietly?"

Henderson made a long stride towards him.

"You'll leave the premises by a short cut if you don't——" The sentence was never finished, the clerk having vanished rapidly.

Mr. Elliott, Collector of Poggulpore, here appeared. He looked less agitated, as he hobbled out on his crutches, now that his wife was safely disposed of, and more dignified. He was nothing

if not dignified, as the ruler of a province has need to be, and this halting gait hampered him exceedingly. The presence of his wife had often much the same effect; he seemed to see a twinkle in her eye and a small smile round her mouth, even if her back were towards him, and the results on him were similar to water on a well-stiffened collar.

"My wife, Mrs. Elliott—at least, I," correcting himself, "I think I knew you, sir, some years ago at Peshawur. You seem to be in difficulties; any assistance I may be able to offer you in the way of advice or—or something more substantial, pray accept in the spirit in which it is volunteered."

"You are all very forbearing and generous to such an outrageous masquerading fool as I must appear. Yes, I was at Peshawur five years ago—Urquhart of the Rifle Brigade."

"Ah!" The judge's flaccid face flushed slowly to an unbecoming purple, and the hospitable gleam in his light watery eyes died out. He had not remembered the man in the least, but Rose had told him that he did, and his British kindness had been willing to help a countryman in distress in a foreign place, but matters were altered a little now. Urquhart saw the change at once. Old memories stirred keenly and bitter pride awoke. Neither of them had forgotten that past rivalry, nor why the one had won and the other lost.

Henderson's quick tact came to the rescue. He noted there was something between the two men, and he dashed into the breach with ready geniality.

"It's no end good of you, Mr. Elliott, to put yourself to such pain and inconvenience, but we have already booked him, for the present at any rate. He's going to shake down with Lanyon and me to-night until he pulls round a bit. Although we aren't exactly old comrades, doubtless we have lots of mutual friends; anyway we mean to see him through. Come on—Urquhart, did you say?" turning to him sunnily. "I am Henderson of the 95th at your service, and you'll soon find out Lanyon of the R.H.A. Brooke is a C.E., but he's as good as one of us, only he isn't putting up here. Now," he linked his arm through the bewildered quondam Hadji and led him off perforce, Lanyon sauntering leisurely behind.

The ruffled Collector of Puggulpore wiped his face with his many-coloured silk handkerchief. "So *he* has turned up again! Confound this d——d leg of mine! Well, if it gives me the tortures of hell itself, we'll sail on Friday in the *Hindoo-Koosh*. By the look of him he'll be down with fever by morning, and we can be off before he comes up again. Rose let too much out of the bag this time, and has made me master of the situation." He chuckled to himself; it was evidently a novel

experience for him by the air of triumph he wore over it.

But was he master of the situation? The judge, learned as he might be in many matters, and able administrator of a province as he had proved himself, had yet to discover that he had *not* mastered the intricacies of a woman's nature when she loves.

CHAPTER XVI.

DESPITE the kindly efforts of his newly-made friends, Urquhart passed a night of intolerable fever. As he had slipped into the cool easy clothes Henderson had lent him after his reviving bath, and saw his old leathern poshteen lying discarded on the floor at his feet, there came a sudden realisation of the atrocious weakness which had overcome him, and he was filled with loathing for this hitherto unknown self which could, in one moment of temptation, slip from the standpoint of honour and right-living to the depths of perjury and faithlessness. What could he have been thinking of?

He literally writhed under the lash of his own conscience. The sound of an English voice, the ring of a laugh, the sight of a foaming tumbler of spirits and he was undone, his manhood overthrown, until he became an object of contempt even in the eyes of those savage outlaws. What story would they carry back to that distant spot he had left only so short a time before, where he had fought in the face of

desperate odds to establish trust in the honour of an Englishman, and whither he meant to return full of brave resolutions for the future? What would they tell that faithful-souled Afghan chief who had stood beside him in that struggle, who had befriended him all these years with a friendship closer than a brother's? How the austere face, which had learnt to soften for him, would harden back into lines of supreme contempt as he listened to the tale of the Feringhee's base betrayal of their trust.

The big room, which the swinging punkahs kept comparatively cool, grew insufferable. His brain was on fire, his eyes swimming, and his ears seething with a very sea in them. He dashed out on to the verandah and threw himself into a Madeira chair of Lanyon's. The room was on the second storey, and his gaze passed over the heads of the happy, careless strollers among the palms in the laid-out gardens below, away across to the blue line of silent sea where his long-unseen island home lay.

But no peaceful vision arose of the old red-brick house with its creepers and many gables; his imagination could only conjure up a lonely hill tower, rough and rude in its architecture, yet graced with a certain beauty to him, the delicate fluttering white folds of a woman's garment, a slender brown arm waving welcome after the weary hours and days of watching—

No! Oh God, nevermore! Great dark eyes dimmed with tears of despair, a small wasted face, heavy with the sorrow of a breaking heart, looked back at him now from every lamp as they began to twinkle out in the dusk.

Lanyon, coming in to look him up after *table d'hôte*, found the tray of food untouched on the table in the room and Urquhart outside, his eyes glittering with fever and his tongue babbling deliriously in Pushtoo. He summoned Henderson, and they soon had him between cool sheets under the punkah. Then they sent for the doctor, who ordered ice bandages and total abstinence from spirits—this last with great stress as he noticed Lanyon making elaborate preparations at a side table for an unlimited supply of his favourite decoctions.

"Don't think much of that old buffer," was Lanyon's irreverent remark on the doctor's receding back. "Fancy saying that the fever was mostly the result of the only thing that keeps a man alive in this weather. A. 'B. and S.' or two make a fellow look like that! Don't fetch *him* when I knock under, that's all, without you want me killed off in double quick time."

But the doctor proved the better judge of the case after all. By noon the next day Urquhart had quieted down into a sober, rational being, a trifle weak about the knees and shadowy-eyed perhaps, but perfectly composed. "The Inseparables," as Lanyon and Henderson were

nicknamed, came in to superintend his toilet, accompanied by a ready-made clothes wallah and a barber. Urquhart submitted to all they chose to carry out upon him with unrousable apathy.

"There! Your best girl wouldn't know you, no, by Gad! not even your wife—if you had such a commodity!" cried Henderson with triumph as the barber moved away and displayed Urquhart bereft of his luxuriant beard, clean-shaved but for his long tawny moustache.

The light words flicked the "raw," and the blood left his face.

"Sit down, old fellow," said Lanyon concernedly, as he stood weighing the merits of a couple of ties, unable to decide which would suit Urquhart's "style of beauty" best. "This furbishing up has been too much for you. From the look of those things," with a smirk at the discarded garments, "I should think it was some time since your dressing took you as long as it has to-day. Here, come out on to the verandah, have a cigar and a whisky before tiffin, that'll set you up."

"No spirits, sir," said Henderson.

"No tiffin, thanks," said Urquhart as promptly.

"Well, have a snack up here, it's jolly and cool, and I daresay the jabbering below would be a trifle ticklish. It might be safer too. You

are altered as to be unrecognisable ; still, those cut-throat companions of yours had devilish sharp eyes, and they might be hanging round still."

Urquhart's face went ashy. "They start to-day—Mecca—pilgrimage, you know," the disjointed words broke off.

Henderson joined in hurriedly, not understanding the cruel cut his small joke had given, and noticing that Urquhart suddenly looked "uncommon queer." "Oh, that's all right, then, but if I were you I'd keep cool till evening, and then show yourself—just to satisfy anxious enquirers."

Urquhart smiled mirthlessly. "Enquirers after me? Not many, I fancy." Rose had passed from his thoughts for the moment, driven out by stronger feelings.

"Well, one is enough, man, when it is *such* an one. The agitated matron of yesterday has tackled us both several times—Mrs. Elliott, you know," he added, seeing Urquhart's puzzled look, "the 'Rose, my love!'" he quoted, at which Lanyon went into a sudden convulsion over the exact imitation of the Collector of Poggulpore's voice, and Urquhart endured another flick.

"You know her—them?" he asked.

"Oh, slightly, hotel acquaintances. Sorry for the old chap, decent fellow *au fond*, but never gets a chance with his wife for ever snubbing

him. Suffers awfully from gout and liver, and there's no sweet attentions from the fair spouse to soothe them. Can't think why she married him. He is deadly prosy and ugly—as a foil, perhaps. She's been up in the hills a lot, and got infected with the air, like most of her sex. The hills play the deuce with most women. I suppose these two took the usual current of matrimony nowadays, not affinity, but anti-thesis."

"Money," said Urquhart, with a bitter sneer, "you bet it was money."

"Look here," began Lanyon, "you had much better make up your mind to come on the *Hindoo-Koosh* with us—sails the end of the week, we're booked. Let us go and see about a berth for you. Some jolly people going—ourselves, for instance!" and he grinned. "You'll soon shake down among them, and the voyage will set you up sooner than anything."

"It's awfully good of you," said Urquhart, "but"—halting lamely—he could not bring himself to own that he had not as much as a rupee in his pocket—"but I thought I'd write to my old regiment, and let them know I'm alive—and——"

"Oh, that'll delay you days. Come with us, you aren't fit to be left alone, and that's the truth," blurted out Lanyon, his honest face betraying the pity he felt for the lonely wanderer.

"I say, Ted, we *must* go," exclaimed Henderson; "we shall be late for that blessed tiffin of Mrs. Pollock's, and be in her bad books for evermore. Let Urquhart think it over. I'm off to get into another coat—meet in the porch," and Henderson departed.

Lanyon lingered, pulling at his moustache nervously. "I say, Urquhart, I don't want to pry into your affairs, nor force confidence, but I know you're awfully down on your luck. Get out of this blessed country; things will look better among your own people. I know what it is to be hard up—my chronic condition—but just now I happen to have four or five hundred rupees you are welcome to, if that's any good to you. Not worth offering, but if you'll decide to come by the *Hindoo-Koosh*, I'll guarantee to raise the wind for you. Don't answer now, think it over, and I'll pop in when I return. Ta-ta, cheer up; you'll find some papers over there." And Captain Lanyon fled from the impending thanks as if they were the cholera at least.

Urquhart was lounging on the couch, soothed to drowsiness by the monotonous swish of the punkahs. The paper which he had been reading, and in which many of the items of news had been as Greek to him, had slipped from his hand to the floor, when a curious noise began outside the door, scratching and whining. He took no notice for some time, but as the yap-

ping seemed likely to continue indefinitely, he rose at last in desperation, and went to the door. He flung it open impatiently with a "Shut up!" but the sentence was snapped off by a fat wheezy terrier flying straight at him with a yell of delight. Poor little Nipper! What weary hours of searching he had gone through to find that master who had appeared only to vanish again. But he had him at last, and he meant to keep him, for he pushed unceremoniously in and marched over to the arm-chair Urquhart had just vacated, took up his seat there, and looked up at Urquhart, saying as plainly as eyes could say, "Come and settle down, old chap, and let's have a smoke together."

It all came back to Urquhart with a rush, the familiar action, the comical setting of the crooked ears, the fore-paws planted until he had settled himself, when they would be stuck under his arm from behind, the head following, and Nipper would be in bliss. It all came to pass just as he had anticipated, only Nipper was fat and wheezy now, and he snorted a good deal; but at last it was all arranged to his satisfaction, and he turned up his head, from where it peeped out by the waiscoat pocket, as if he were expecting a conversation to begin. Urquhart and he had had many a council in days gone by, and his dog sympathy had been a wonderful comfort.

“Well, Nip, dear old boy, so you haven't forgotten me? The bad penny come back again, eh? Ah well, pennies, good or bad, make no count with you. Do I look more like old times to-day? Here, keep down. Don't eat me up, and allow me to suggest that I *did* wash my face this morning!”

But Nipper did not appear to believe the statement, for he could not keep in his usual tucked-away position, but pushed through the arm, and he licked and pranced about on Urquhart's knee and barked, and showed his joy in general boisterous canine style. It did Urquhart's tired heart good, and he seized the dog's nozzle in his hand and held it while he gazed down into the faithful brown eyes. Something in their soft depth of patient love stirred him; the past was going in kaleidoscopic scenes through his brain until the watching eyes changed to a woman's, as deep and true and devoted, but whose faithful watch would never meet with such reward.

“Oh, Nipper! if you only knew how your staunch dog-heart would turn in disgust from your worthless master! Go away, Nipper, I cannot face those eyes of yours.”

He almost roughly pushed the dog off his knee, rose, and went to Lanyon's side table, where he mixed a strong drink, and took it down at a draught. Nipper, much wounded at this treatment, lay limply on the floor, following every

movement of his master, but not daring to obtrude himself further until invited. Dogs are very proud and terribly sensitive, and have a keen intuition that tells them when they are not wanted—it were well if humans shared that instinct more generally.

A tap came to the door, and a noiseless-footed bearer entered with a note on a salver, handed it to Urquhart, and departed with one brief glance at the dog. No surprise showed in his impassive face, though much was in his mind.

The writing on the envelope was a woman's : "Richard Urquhart, Esq.," sprawly still, and with the same unfinished curves. Urquhart flushed as he broke the seal and read the short note.

"Will you not come and see me? · If you are ill, may I not come to you? I will make any time convenient, only come.—WHITE ROSE."

He went to the table, took up a sheet of paper, and wrote, "Since you ask it, I will be with you in the course of an hour.—R. U."

He despatched it by the same bearer, whom he found hanging about outside, then sat down again to study those few lines. How the sight of that writing had once had power to thrill him ; what would he not have given then for such a note? But she had not been so eager for meetings

in those days. What we can have for the taking we rarely appreciate; it is when it is slipping from our grasp, too far gone for us to have a firm hold, that we snatch after it greedily, seeing all sorts of beauties in it which were never there before. Once he used to hang about for hours, "in expectation of at least a smile," content with just one glance from his blue heaven of bliss. Now the note lay coldly between his fingers until it dropped to the floor, where Nipper soon converted it into indistinguishable pulp. *That* seemed like old times to *him*, at any rate, whatever his master might be feeling. How many letters had he not confiscated thus? As Urquhart used to say, Nipper was a "a capital protector, for he takes jolly good care there shall never be any damning papers about while he has a chance to get at them."

"This won't do," Urquhart said at last, rising wearily, "I shall go mad if I sit thinking."

Nipper at the movement sprang up too, and began to frisk round his old master, his tail jerking shortly and one ear cocked. Was it going to be a "mouch round," or a long delicious scamper, such as he had not had since one black day in his doggie diary, when he lay, hour after hour, until literally dragged away, on the cold sword-belt to guard it for the owner who never returned? The belt had been more faithfully guarded than the sword. But Nipper did not know this new master, and he was alto-

gether out in his calculations, so he gave a positive howl of disgust and rage as he followed him along the corridor, where, instead of going down the staircase to the hall, and thence out for the expected excursion, Urquhart turned off to the left, down a side passage, and tapped at the door of the dog's present and unappreciated abode. It was too disgusting to be endured, and the terrier flumped down on the mat in an honest fit of sulks.

But Urquhart was sunk in thought too painful to pay much attention to a dog's humours. The room he entered was carefully shrouded from the glare without, and a lovely green glow pervaded it; the punkahs worked drowsily, huge palms stood about, and a faint exquisite odour of flowers filled the almost cool air. In the centre of the room was a large block of ice, partially hidden by ferns and various leafy plants. On a table reposed a tray with all the paraphernalia for kettledrum, a smaller table held ices, squashes, and such. Money was not lacking here.

Urquhart, however, noticed none of these things. Life was strung at too high a tension for details to enter into it. His eyes turned instinctively to the further end whence his ear had caught the soft frou-frou of silk. Mrs. Elliott was coming forward to meet him. She was looking rarely beautiful in her agitation. Her rich gown of dead white silk fell closely to

her slender figure, on which lace frills tumbled about, mixed with the palest primrose ribbons, the sleeves were wide and loose, and left the perfectly modelled arms bare almost from the shoulder, save for a fine gauze which draped, but did not conceal, their charms. The white neck and bosom gleamed out through the same faint covering. She had arranged her hair very simply, in much the same style she had worn it five years ago. Time had not altered the perfect face, at least so Urquhart thought as he looked at it scrutinisingly now. The cheeks, perhaps, were a trifle less rounded and pink, but to the blue eyes had been added depth and intensity.

"Oh! it is good of you to come when you are so ill." She advanced to meet him with outstretched hands. "I know so much of illness now," she sighed.

Urquhart remembered Henderson's remarks anent the Collector's sufferings and the paucity of attention he received, and his face hardened.

"Oh, I am not ill now, thanks, it was only a very temporary break-down," he replied, as she sank back on her lounge, and motioned him to one close beside her. He took instead a stiff-backed affair some paces off, and made a slight sound to attract the dog to him.

"Nipper knew you," she said softly.

"More than I should have done of Nipper,

The poor little brute is spoilt. He never set up for a beauty, but he used to be in tidy form, now he's horribly out of condition."

"Oh!" regretfully, "and I have taken such care of him all this time," with a low sigh, adding the words, "for your sake."

"Best not take care of dogs at all," said Urquhart, with almost brutal matter-of-factness, ignoring the sentimental ending entirely; "they generally manage to do that better themselves than anyone can do it for them. Exercise is the chief thing to provide them with; give them plenty of that and they'll be all right."

"Ah, well! he will get plenty of that again now. Of course you will take him back?"

"Oh, no, of course not!" corrected Urquhart quickly, running his hand down Nipper's spine caressingly. "You have earned the right to him for evermore. I have no claim to him. He is yours, and I doubt if, after all this spoiling, he'll take kindly to training again."

"No claim to him!" She sat up flushing brilliantly. "All the greater claim for his being *mine*." Her colour deepened vividly, her eyes melted to unutterable tenderness, and she sprang to her feet. "Dick! Oh, Dick!"

Urquhart was on his feet too, his breath coming thickly. "Rose!" he gasped.

"Oh! my dear, dear love, my lost darling, given back to me from the grave!"

She stretched out her hands to him; they were

trembling uncontrollably, and her eyes were brimming with big tears.

The blood ran hotly through his veins, throbbing in his temples, blurring his vision. He seized her hand in a swift, tight grasp, drew her to him, but ere the golden head had touched his breast conscience stirred. He dropped her hands as if they were red-hot.

"Great God! What have I fallen to?" He turned blindly to seek the door, but she caught his hand.

"Oh! Dick, forgive me; forget my madness. I have not yet recovered from the shock of yesterday. I will be mad no longer. Stay. Oh! do not go away. Indeed, indeed, I will be calm—anything if you will only not go. See——"

He still made for the door, knowing that sheer flight was his only safety under the magic of her beauty.

"See, I am quite calm now. Come and sit down, and let me make you some tea. It is hot, but it refreshes one afterwards. Or perhaps you would like to have something else. Go and choose."

She laid her hand on his arm in a gentle, detaining pressure, and he could not do otherwise than give in to such eager, wistful pleading. With a supreme effort, for he had been shaken to his very foundation, he recovered control of himself, wiped his damp forehead, and went over to the side table. He mixed himself a

glass of stiff whisky and soda, and gulped it down. His face was very pale, and his eyes looked like blue glass.

Womanlike, she had gained quicker mastery of herself. Without a falter she performed the dainty little service of tea-making, chattering lightly the while, and feeding Nipper lavishly with scraps of cake and sweet biscuits. It was ludicrous to see the half-sly way the dog darted a swift glance at Urquhart as he took each mouthful, evidently knowing such proceedings were entirely at variance with the old *régime*, and not comprehending why the expected reprimands did not come.

"No wonder the dog is such a hideous little wreck now, if that is how you have been treating him—Mrs. Elliott!" Urquhart said at last.

She flashed her eyes upon him for one second at the name, and her hand shook the boiling water from the hissing kettle on to the tray. He jumped up. "Allow me," he said, "it is too heavy for you."

"Thanks,—yes, it is heavy when full." She watched him pour the water into the teapot on to the silver egg full of the fragrant leaves. "There, that will be enough I think," she said, putting up her hand in a pretty peremptory way to check him. Then she looked up at him. "Do you remember——" she began.

"I remember *nothing*, Mrs. Elliott, please—

nor do you. Shall I tell you how I am here and all that sort of thing?"

"Oh do! I have not liked to ask you, but you know——" She did not finish the sentence. Silence is often more eloquent than speech.

As they sipped their tea and nibbled mouthfuls of dainty sweetmeats, he told her a little of his past life, the merest outline of it, something in the essay style on the manners and customs of the Afghans, with no allusion to private affairs, his marriage, or the reason of his pilgrimage, no mention of the horrible temptation and fall, and the despairing repentance with which his heart was now wrung.

And she hung on every word, drank it all in, and believed that he had told her everything; whereas she was merely on the surface of it all, and had come nowhere near his inner self.

"But now you will come back to England—away from that awful life, back to us all? I mean," hurriedly, "don't you want to see your people—your father that you used to talk to me about?"

"Yes, I do, but," he laughed, "I am tied here until I hear from the old regiment. There ought to be some funds due to me from the sale of my things. Did you hear anything of them?"

"Yes, a little," blushing. "Mr. Mackenzie and I became great friends after you left. He let me

have Nipper—and—and—he bought in—I mean he let me have a few of your things, nothing of any value at all,” and she looked painfully confused.

“What things?” he asked curiously and regarding her with interest, watching with a pleasure he could not stifle those pretty blushes.

“Oh,” she laughed shyly, “nothing you would care about; your belt—that I had to take with Nipper, for he refused to leave it, and your riding-whip, that one with the awful-looking skull on the handle—you used to carry it sometimes when we——”

“Yes, yes,” said Urquhart hurriedly to interrupt the touch of sentiment, “anything else?”

She evaded the question. “Mr. Mackenzie, I think, sent home your books and some of your small things by one of the fellows to your father. By the way, Mr. Mackenzie,—or rather Captain Mackenzie, though I have not seen him since his promotion—is in England. If you go home you will see him. He went three months ago to get married.”

“Really? I am glad. So they had to wait all these years for him to get his step. Lucky fellow!”

“Lucky?” she said, “at having to wait ‘all these years’?”

“No, lucky in having found someone willing

to endure the waiting faithfully with him," he replied sombrely.

She set down her cup with a little jar on the saucer. He had had no intention as he spoke of (in vulgar parlance) talking at her, but the words had struck home.

"The thought of seeing old Mac tempts me strongly, but it can't be managed yet."

"Why not? Come in the *Hindoo-Koosh*," she said rather quickly, as if by so speaking she would keep the eagerness out of her tones. "It is not crowded, mostly officers going. You would be sure to come across old friends."

"It cannot be. I have not the funds at present. The old impecunious state, Rosie"—the girlish name slipped out so naturally he did not notice it, but she did, and her heart bounded—"no richer than when I went away. As worthless for a friend now as I once was as a—lover."

"Hush! Oh, do not be so cruel!" she wailed, and covered her face with her little white hands.

"Forgive me! I am not fit for civilised society."

She fidgeted with the china, poured out another cup of tea, and drank it off thirstily, glancing at him half surreptitiously over the cup once or twice with a strange hesitancy in her manner. Then she set the cup down, drained to the very dregs for courage to help her.

"We are friends?" she asked softly. "You will let us at least be that?"

"Of course I am your friend—why do you ask?"

"Because—friends help each other, that is part of the joy of friendship. Will you, please, for the sake of—of old ties, let me have some of the joy too?"

He began to get uncomfortably hot as he stammered, "I would do anything to add to your happiness, if such a thing wanted increasing. But one would think you had all in a woman's chief and only desire—money."

She raised her eyes slowly and looked at him, but said nothing. Perhaps the shadow falling over her face told him all that was left unsaid, for his voice took a tender cadence as he said, leaning forward in his chair close to her:

"Tell me what is this wonderful proposition you are going to make."

"I have so much money now, Dick, and, though I paid a heavy price for it, God knows it has brought me not one grain of happiness as reward. I used to think I would help dear old dad, but just after my marriage he came into a lot of money, and they needed no help from me. So that was no use!" and her voice quivered pathetically, then went on: "My husband is very generous to me, I have far more than I ever need—so won't you—oh, do not refuse me!" she

pleaded as she saw the beloved face falling into the proud lines she knew so well. "If you only knew what it is to feel that some of this money I paid so dearly for could be of real use to anyone! It is indeed my own under my own settlement deed. *Please, Dick!*" with the old caress in her sweet voice that he knew.

"I cannot! You ask too much of me. *I touch your husband's money!*" A strong shiver of repulsion shook him, "Never!"

"But *mine*, Dick, just to please me! After all these years. Oh, dear Dick, grant me this!"

She had never looked more beautiful in all her life than she did at that moment with her great blue eyes full of desperate love and entreaty, and her red lips quivering with emotion. And she loved him! Whatever she *had* done, however she had once failed him, she loved him now with a passion and abandonment that swept his wavering resolution with it. He was weak as water with her.

"No one need know anything about it, I have it here by me, and no use for it. Take it, Dick, as a gift. Oh, it would make me so happy, and—and these years have been no happier for me than for you. Dear Dick, you won't refuse me?"

She leaned towards him and put her hand on his coat-sleeve with gentle pressure.

"I can refuse you nothing!" he burst out almost with a groan as he let himself go. Her

old witchery was over him, and he could but play Merlin to her Vivien.

"Ah, you are good!" She rose and went to a small strongly-bound box, and opened it with a key off her *châtelaine*. She stood undecided before one of the drawers, then drew out a small leather bag.

"It will be better—handier, I mean, in ready money," and she put it into his hand. There was a strange radiance on her face.

"As a loan only," he said; "I will sit down and write you an IOU for it."

"Not now—any time. Let us talk now. There is not much more time and there is so much to say. I have to go out driving presently with my husband."

"He is better, then?"

"Oh dear, no, but as he means to start this week whatever he is like, a little drill in pain-bearing is necessary." A curious swift smile fluttered over her face, and instead of softening under it, her mobile lips hardened.

Urquhart caught the strange anomaly and it puzzled him. There came upon him a momentary apprehension of what, he did not know, but he cursed his despicable weakness afresh. In that brief glimpse he saw how the little girl he had left had altered. There had been a lack of character in her face, perhaps, in her early girlhood, though he had never seen what others had read there, but that lack had been supplied by

hardness—a dangerous quality for her womanhood to have gained.

None of the delirious happiness this interview brought to her was in Urquhart's heart when he at last tore himself away from her.

"John," said Mrs. Elliott that evening as she sat with him after dinner, reading in a desultory way, and watching him writhing under a paroxysm of pain, his yellow face tinged to purple hue, and his forehead beady with perspiration, "it is quite absurd of you to entertain the idea of starting on Friday. You know you can't move without pain."

"And shall I not be able to endure pain as well on Friday as to-day?"

"You had much better send and try to change our tickets for a later steamer."

She was fanning herself slowly with a gorgeous fan of peacock's feathers, the gold sticks set with diamonds, which scintillated at every sway. Her lovely face looked demurely innocent, but under her lashes she shot a swift glance at him.

"You are very much concerned about my comfort, Rose, all of a sudden!" he remarked with suspicion. He chuckled a little inwardly, so elated was he at possessing what he imagined to be the key to her manner.

"Oh, no! It's nothing to me," with a light shrug of her bare shoulders, and a perfect galaxy of stars from her fan sticks, "only as

you have postponed it twice, why so suddenly dash off in this reckless way when you really are worse than you were either of the other times?"

"Because I choose to do so. What I have said I keep to—we start on Friday if I am carried on board. So you had better make the most of your few days remaining in saying good-bye to your *friends*."

She put the fan up to her face to hide her curling lips. "Stupid old idiot! And he thinks he is impenetrable! What fun to see his face when they meet! Oh dear, I must jump up or I shall laugh outright! Men are kittle-cattle, the poor clumsy dears! Just pull them back and off they start down the very road you want them to take all the time! Talk of Paddy's pigs! Why, a pig isn't in it at all, at all—shure!" And she smiled to herself in appreciation of her own conceit.

Her exuberance was so irrepressible all the rest of the evening, that Mr. Elliott, between his groans and contortions, began to have fresh misgivings about his plans, but pain ultimately overcame them, and the fixtures for Friday were left as then standing.

CHAPTER XVII.

“’Tis moonlight over Oman’s Sea,
Her banks of pearl and porphery
Bask in the night beam beauteously.”

THE *Hindoo-Koosh* stood out to sea. The last lights of Bombay had sunk into the purple; the grey towers of silence where the Parsees lay their dead, and the white buildings of European erection had together melted into haze; the long snowy wake of foam was gleaming with phosphorescent sparkles under the stern where the twin screws churned it into fiery cascades—how many untiring revolutions before they stirred the cold dull waters of the Solent?

Homeward bound! How sad eyes brightened, and men, wasted with the strain of Indian life, felt new vigour flow through their veins at those magic words. The last adieux had long since been said, and kindly hands had waved mingled sympathy and regret from the quay. Some of those farewells had been for ever, though none knew it then. The devoted boy officers of a native infantry regiment had come down to say

"Good-bye and God-speed" to their played-out chief, wishing him a speedy return as they surrounded him, each eager for another word from the kindly lips of the brave man who had made his last march among them. The falling rupee value had tempted him to linger too long in that life-sapping climate, struggling for the sturdy boys and girls at home, but most of all to ensure comfort for the devoted woman whom a cruel fate had torn from his side when he needed her most. She would be there at Southampton to meet him, her sweet face one glow of joy at the prospect of once more feeling the stalwart arms of her brave old soldier-lover about her, the youngest curly-headed boy proudly taking care of her "till Daddy comes!" There they would stand on the quay with straining eyes, searching the crowded bulwarks for the first glimpse of the thin, worn face. In vain! The hungry Red Sea sharks had reached the sewn-up hammock before the shot at his feet had carried the gallant officer to his well-earned rest beneath the waves. Why not? As well so—as well in that limitless grave as under the tall elms in the peaceful churchyard of his native village, where, in the small church, his old father, the rector, would have dim spectacles as he read—

"When the sea shall give up her dead."

Urquhart had struck up a brief friendship with the "on-sick-leave" officer, and had shown

much attention to him during his short illness. Something in the patient submission to the awful disappointment touched him deeply; the quiet acceptance of these unexpected "marching orders," with not one rebellious word, gave the younger man a peep into a life of nobility he scarcely recked of. He would sit for hours in the airless, confined cabin by the narrow berth of the dying man, doing all he could, which after all was nothing, to solace his last hours. He took down the farewell letter to the wife who had sent such passionate, loving welcome to meet her husband at Aden—pages filled with the rapture of the approaching union, plans for future pleasure *together*—and as Urquhart wrote those simple, manly words, loyalty breathing in every one of them, the life-long loyalty, in "thought, word, and deed," of a blameless life, he broke down. Remorse that could know no rest over that blemished past of his, swept over him, and he lay on the couch of the cabin, writhing in a strong man's impotent anguish, while the dying soldier uttered a silent prayer for him, and realised that, after all, there is a death more bitter than the dissolution of soul and spirit—the death of honour.

As Urquhart stood chief mourner round the flag-shrouded form, and heard the quiet splash as the body sank into the still sea, he was overwhelmed with envy. Oh, that he had died in one of those wild fights among the Afghan hills

—died like the gentleman he was—no more! Why not end it now? Only a jump through the open gangway, and a mad dive under the keel, and all would be over. And yet, what avail to add cowardice to dishonour? *She* could never know he had died to show his fealty to her—no message could be sent back to those impenetrable hills, no brain wave could reach her—still!—— He made a step forward. Lanyon, with bared reverent head beside him, had been watching his working face, and slipped his arm through Urquhart's.

“Come away, old chap, it's over, and the men are waiting to close up.”

“Yes, it's over,” said Urquhart, absent-mindedly; then, “I'll go below for a bit. My head——”

He went below, and the steamer was through the Canal and on the way to Malta before he was seen again.

Meanwhile, the Collector of Poggulpore had succumbed to his woes; sea-sickness was added to the gout, and he was prostrate. He had been, as he had valiantly said he would be, “carried on board,” straight down to the state cabin unstinted payment had enabled “Mr. and Mrs. Elliott” to procure for themselves alone, and there he lay and groaned, while his wife, prettier than ever, with the sea-roses on her cheeks, and the sparkle from the ozone in her eyes, donned her most telling garments, and captivated all the

men on board—all but the only one she cared one iota for. Urquhart held aloof, fighting desperately against these terrible odds. He had found safety with the old Colonel for a time, but the ill-luck which followed him relentlessly had removed that safeguard from him; a sharp touch of the fever he had taken into his system in that Afghan burial-ground, brought him respite for a few days, but as soon as strength permitted, he was compelled to leave his stuffy cabin and crawl up on deck, panting for fresh air and space.

The wide white decks were deserted, *table d'hôte* was going on in the saloon below. The clatter of plates and dishes, the hum of voices, now and then a laugh mingled with the soft sough of the wind as it swept through the rigging, and blew with refreshing coolness on Urquhart's face. Chairs, rugs, cushions, stools, lay higgledy-piggledy about just as their owners had left them when they went below in answer to the dinner summons.

Urquhart moved farther off, and sought a more retired spot where the jarring of the common-place could not reach him, and leaned over the taffrail. He felt morally strong that day; the bodily tussle with illness had nerved him mentally, while the enforced cessation from spirits, and the simple dieting, had reduced his feverish brain to temperate point. As he watched the sea drifting quickly by, he made many valiant resolves

to strive to atone for the past by rigid living for the future, and thereby in a small measure to redeem the rest of his life from the stain which lay upon it. As he thought thus, there came to him a moment when he realised the cold, stern rapture of the ascetic over subdued carnality; his fleshly lusts fell from him, and he stood, as it were, "alone on a mountain top," breathing the cleansing air into his moral lungs with a hitherto unknown sense of exultation.

The slight fog which had risen as the warm glory of the setting sun faded from the sky floated round him gently in her soft, grey robe, cutting him off from his surroundings and giving him a brief space of ineffable rest from life itself. Earth and its allurements were left far below in the wilderness of temptation through which he had passed.

Then——the tempter scaled the pure height. Long cunning experience with man's frailties has given him knowledge that the peak of exaltation is often his golden opportunity; the human brain is weak, and apt to swim and lose its balance on these unfamiliar crags, and the greater the elevation the deeper the corresponding descent. He laid his snare quickly—the rarefied air this soul was breathing was uncongenial to each—but so deftly as to be unrecognisable. Then he chuckled grimly and vanished, satisfied as to the "last state of that man" being all he could desire.

A slight figure stole through the mist to Urquhart's side, a feather touch was laid on his arm, and a voice, alluring and intensely pathetic, whispered :

"Oh, Dick, what it is to see you again, to feel you, to be near you! These few days have been hours of horror. For my sake, dear, try to get strong and back to your old self."

Her face, exquisite in its seductive tenderness, was close to his shoulder; a light wrap of lace framed it, and one white hand held the dainty fabric together under the upturned chin. He started violently at the sound of her voice. A start is fatal when the foothold is insecure. With a rattle as of moral stones—the good resolves and lofty aspirations on which he had mentally stood—he descended into—— True, there was one faint attempt at a "Get thee behind me!" in the abrupt—

"How the—I mean, how did you know I was here?"

A perceptible tremble was in her voice as she answered, "Don't, oh, do not speak like that, as if you did not want to see me. I was late going in to dinner, John kept me, and as I left my cabin I saw you just going up, and—and—oh, Dick, I could not stay to eat and listen to those hateful cacklers when I knew you were up here! I said I did not feel very well, a little faint, and I only wanted fresh air. I only wanted *you*. Oh, Dick, how I

have wanted you for all these years, and now you have come back to me——” A sob broke through the words, and she rested her head on his arm.

“You will be my friend?”

He tried to evade the impending tragedy by a touch of mirth. He gave a short laugh as he said: “Hadn’t you better be wise in your generation ‘and make for yourself friends of the mammon’ and so forth, not choose a beggarly chap without a rupee? I can be no manner of use to you—leave me alone! It is the only kindness *you* can do me—Rose.”

Her head moved from the shoulder a little closer in at her name. She gave no other answer, and they watched in silence the fading of the mist as the moon got up and turned the woman’s golden hair to threads of silver with its beams. She looked altogether a silver ghost in her clinging mist-damp gown and pale face out of which her blue eyes darkly glowed.

To both of them came the memory of another night such as this, when mist and moonlight had been about them, among the oleanders in the mess-compound, when he had held her in his arms and kissed her with a breaking heart, pleading for “just one kiss,” which had been withheld. Both hearts felt breaking now.

“How could I tell I should love thee afar
When I did not love thee anear?”

He knew her thoughts, and a sort of terror of the future seized him in this shadowy silence. Should he tell her all that lay between them as an impassable barrier? Yet, what good? Not now—some other time, later, when he was stronger, more master of himself and of her. And the “day of salvation” passed.

“Dick,” she said, and she laid her cold fingers on his hand as it gripped the taffrail, running one of them up and down the network of veins, “don’t scorn me as I deserve, don’t be unkind, or I shall die. I could not live to face your anger, your coldness. If you refuse to forgive me, I—— Oh, I can’t tell you what passion of regret I have lived through since I let you go from me! Be my friend, for I am very lonely now.”

“You have your husband, make him your friend—he is your only lawful one.” He nearly laughed aloud at the hideous falseness in his words. What was *he* to speak to her like that?

“Him—my husband! He is not my husband—he never has been! He is my possessor, that is all. My friend!” Her fingers tightened over his now, he felt their intense touch, yet made an outward grasp as it were to stay this hideous downward fall.

“Give me up, Rose,” he said, speaking as indifferently as though he were merely asking her to discard the lace wrap about her shoulders. It had fallen off her head and was lying loosely

round her small throat, and the tiny breeze which ever lives on the sea raised the silver curls about her forehead and wafted them gently about. "Throw me over for good—for bad," he corrected, with a short harsh laugh; "I am no good to you, I never can be any good to you or anyone. Your truest friendship to yourself and to me is to let me go again as I once went. It is a cursed perversity of fate that has brought me across your path. I——"

"Oh, Dick, do not talk like this, you are only breaking my heart, and I am so desperately miserable. I must have you for my friend. I *cannot* lose you now I have got you back. Let us be friends!" her woman's nature snatching greedily for the crumbs of the whole loaf she had once thrown away.

She suddenly turned and flung her arms about his neck, and raised her face to his. He drew her swiftly into the protecting darkness behind the wheelhouse. The sweet trembling mouth and tear-filled eyes were too much for him, the whole surroundings, the black shadow in which they stood, the broad expanse of sea with its path of glory shining there before them, the moonlight all about them, the soft swish of the waters, everything together combined to plot his final fall. His arm clasped her shoulders, pressed her to him, he stooped, and their lips met.

The warning for lights to be extinguished

sounded like the sardonic chuckle of Mephistopheles as he gloated over this new Faust and Marguerite, whispering to himself with slight perversion, "*Sie sind die Erste nicht.*" Who knows—perhaps even *his* occupation palls upon him, the victims fall so swiftly that the spice of uncertainty is taken from the chase!

Without a word, Urquhart led her below. They walked together down the long deck, following their own black shadows, like the dark destiny before them. He left her in the alley-way which led to her cabin, scarcely touching her outstretched hand, and returning no reply to her good-night—he knew too well beforehand what *his* night was likely to be! Then he went sharply off to the bar and took the stiffest brandy-pawnee which had been mixed there for many a day. His blood was fired to the old mad fever-heat, his berth stifled him, he could never sleep below. He dragged a mattress up on deck, and getting into comfortable attire, lay there all night, first in the moonlight and then in the darkness, tossing, rolling, thinking. Thinking! Would his brain never cease its whirl, never give him one moment's respite! The faces of Zorayda and Rose danced before him in a mad phantasmagoria. He knew he had lost all hold of himself. He was like some maddened horse being ridden on to death by a demon rider. His thoughts were spurs that dug deep and drew mental blood at

every stab. He sprang up and paced the deck, trying by action to tire himself out bodily, but without success. He was sick at heart, and yet could find no rest. What did it matter? What did anything matter? Were we accountable beings at all? No! It was all a hideous immutable Fate which shaped our destinies. How could we aspire to resist the heredities, the long chain of events forged before we were born, carried on after we have ceased to be, dragging us whither we would not, binding us when we would be free? He had ruined one woman's life, because this cursed chain had dragged him on an unwilling captive,—must he mar another's? Ah, but not only the one in each case! We rarely suffer for our misdeeds alone, but those others bound up in the happiness of that one, Rose's husband, Zorayda's father. No, a thousand times, no! He would break loose when once he was off this infernal prison! He *must* be strong, for she was weak. And once more he flung himself down, and this time he slept.

The sun rose—

“Not as in Northern climes obscurely bright,
But one unclouded blaze of living light.”

One of the ship's boys brought him a cup of coffee. He drank it off, but a few minutes later, as the fellow repassed him, asked for a whisky and soda. The Lascars began to turn the hose

in cool cascades about the deck, and Urquhart stood beneath it and felt so invigorated physically and morally, that when the drink came he hesitated, put the tumbler to his lips, and then made as though to throw the contents overboard. The dawning surprise on the boy's face checked him. "What folly!" he said to himself, and swallowed it down. Such slaves are we to that autocrat of modern times, "What will they think?"

Mrs. Elliott did not appear at breakfast, but she was on deck when Urquhart went up for his smoke, and the vacant chair beside her was evidently being kept for him, for she smiled her welcome at him and her eyes gave the invitation her lips had no need to repeat. They sat together through the idle day, and through all the *dolce far niente* hours of the following days, until even the liberal allowance of "board-ship" flirtation had been overstepped. Jokes turned to seriousness, the women-folk looked askance, and the men shrugged their shoulders, and said, "Poor old Elliott, better for him to have endured gout in Poggulpore than taken passage in the *Hindoo-Koosh*."

"The Inseparables," lenient fellows as soldiers are in matters of such sort, began to treat Urquhart coldly. If the husband had been about to look after his property matters would have assumed a totally different aspect to them, but their English honesty revolted at what they termed this "poaching."

Urquhart saw it all, realised it with an intensity which burnt into his very soul, but could not break free. All his thoughts went forward to the moment of freedom when he should reach Southampton. In the awful hours of the night when he lay sleepless in a hell his struggling conscience prepared for him, he made many plans, all tending to one end—escape back to the pure living of that mountain home where shone the one hope like a star in his black sky, the love and forgiveness of Zorayda. In her pardon he would find peace, in her devotion soothing for his weariness.

Those were the thoughts and resolutions of wakeful nights ; the daytime brought—Rose. Propinquity is a vast influence in the lives of men and women. She wove her spells about him, the honey of her words and looks clogged his better soul, choked his conscience, and he sank into a state of indifference, from which he gave up the attempt to rouse himself. Not even the near prospect of home, of meeting his father, of hearing the cheery chaff of his brothers, of feeling his sisters' hearty kisses, with which he knew would not be blended one hint at reproach for the pain his recklessness had caused them, could move him now.

Lanyon made some efforts to draw him back into touch with him and Henderson, but without avail. Urquhart showed so plainly that their overtures were unpleasant to him that Lanyon

could not continue them long in the face of such unresponsiveness.

“By Jove!” he said to Henderson one day when they had been speculating about Urquhart, “I don’t understand that fellow. Anyone can see he is just eating his heart out over something. I never saw such awful horrors as there are in his eyes sometimes. I’d stake any amount he doesn’t care for Mrs. Elliott. Why in the name of everything he doesn’t break loose from her I can’t think! Gad, I don’t understand him, but I know I’m awfully sorry for him, and I don’t know why, either! He’s a good fellow with a bad twist come somehow that sent him off the lines, and *she’s* not the one to put him straight again.”

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE long line of chalk cliffs gleamed through the early mists, the ship ploughed the grey waters of the Channel, swept hugely through the Solent, and Southampton came into sight.

All was bustle and confusion on board. Mr. Elliott, recovered now, but looking perhaps more yellow-visaged and unattractive than ever, hovered over his wife, directing her one moment, clumsily striving to assist her the next by carrying out those same directions, and keeping up all the while such a continual string of puffed-out ejaculations—"Rose, my love," "Don't you think so, my dear?"—that at last Rose's nerves, strung up to the fullest pitch, gave way. She felt she must scream, seize something, and smash it, crush it, grind it to powder.

As his flat, wheezing remarks bubbled over, one after the other, with little simmering hisses she banged the things about with ever-accumulating viciousness, not packing, not really doing anything of the least practical value, merely jumbling all together in a havoc, for which her

long-suffering maid would have to pay the penalty later on.

At last, in a burst of culminating marital disgust, she flung down her travelling bag on to the couch of the cabin, whence it slipped to the floor with a rattle and a thud, while the contents tumbled out in helpless confusion.

"For Heaven's sake, John, leave me alone! Or, better still, I will leave you alone!" And she fled from the steamy state-room.

"But, my dear——"

He spoke to space. Mrs. Elliott was on her way up the companion.

What could it matter, the loss of some stupid old gold-stoppered bottles, when before her, coming nearer with every pant of the engine, was a prospect of a loss that even the mere thought of drove her desperate? Up the companion she staggered, tripping over her skirt, blindly grasping at the stair-rail, longing only for air, for anything to relieve this sense of suffocation that narrow compartment below had given her. She felt like a bird banging its wings hopelessly against the bars of an imprisoning cage that the ruthless hand of Fate was inexorably closing.

Dick, in his long ulster and soft travelling cap well crushed down on his head, passed along the deck as she emerged.

The real parting between them had taken place the night before. Since then they had

not met. He had not dared to let himself think. Thinking meant——. Ah, well! He knew that what he insisted upon making himself believe to be kindness to Rose was something in reality very much the reverse.

So all this last day he had kept determinedly out of her way with a belated spurious effort to appease his conscience. She had her husband, he thought, her maid—they were her rightful helpers. Unlimited money could buy service of every sort, conjugal and servile. And so he had assiduously attached himself on this final day to a certain Mrs. Vivian, who had money to purchase neither, and fussed about with her over her boxes and her children, and listened patiently to the harassed little woman's querulous complaints while he did his best to smooth things for her. Only in constant action was there respite.

And now! Here came Rose, stumbling up the stairway, with eyes blinded by passionate tears. He stopped and held out his hand to her to assist her over the last step, as he saw her unsteadiness, and she emerged into Bedlam let loose.

Men rushed hither and thither, shouting to each other, and dragging long ropes about which thumped with wet swishes over the slippery decks. The hold was being disembowelled of its innumerable contents, to the accompaniment of groaning and squeaking pulleys and the braying

—no, rattling—of a donkey-engine, while boxes and trunks of every sort, size, and description, rose gradually up into walls of luggage. Officers with their orders tried to preserve some attempt at working harmony; ubiquitous children dangerously pushed their small but impeding forms everywhere where they were in least request, some laughing and game for any chance scrap of fun, others frightened at the unusual confusion, and crying peevishly at the incomprehensible neglect on the part of care-taking elders.

And to add to the discomfort of it all, the general welcome extended by an English climate had not failed to keep up its character in this instance; a steady relentless rain was falling, a regular Scotch mist that somehow Dick revelled in, it “looked so familiar and homelike,” but that most people anathematised, the men loudly and outspokenly, the women inwardly, but none the less heartfelt for that.

“Can I do anything for you, Mrs. Elliott?” he asked, trying to tune his voice to brisk everyday matter-of-factness. “You will get so wet if you venture out,” he suggested, as he saw the grey dew already settling on her bared golden head.

“Dick!” she gasped, paying no heed to his warning, it is questionable if she even heard it, and the fingers clenching his supporting hand tightened convulsively, “I—we——” She broke off “We are there!”

She got it out at last, stating the very palpable fact with not much attempt at originality.

"Yes," he said drily, "we are there. That is easily to be seen and heard. I should advise you to keep to the safe shelter of your cabin, if you value your life at a hair's breadth. I wonder people ever dare to start with the overwhelming amount of lumber they do when they know what it entails at the other end."

"*You* are not troubled much with encumbrances," she said. "How thankful you must be now that you are so possessionless."

"And you are rather over-weighted in that line. There are compensations to be found after all for poverty."

He laughed—a laugh of simple embarrassment, and as far from any real mirth as a sigh would have been—and began to rattle out a rigmarole about the dilemmas of Mrs. Vivian, who could not make up her account correctly of the amount of impedimenta, animate and inanimate, she possessed.

"She wasn't quite sure if she had five black trunks marked with red crosses, and four children, or t'other way about, and I am just starting off on a cruise of investigation to see if there happen to be any stray kids about bearing the badge of the red cross—or perhaps, after all, it is the boxes that——"

"Dick!" Rose burst in. "This is the end! And you can talk of that woman and her boxes.

Tell me," she said pleadingly, "you did not mean what you said last night—you will come and see me soon? You are going home now, you say, into the country?"

"Yes, dear," he said quietly, "and so are you." Her face quivered piteously. "Try, Rose, to forget me in your new surroundings. You can, you know, if you will only give yourself up to it.

"Oh, no, no! You said you would be my friend; you promised, and you must keep your promise. Promise me, Dick, promise me you'll come soon and see me?"

"It is better not, Rose, indeed it is. We argued it out last night. Try to forget me. If you could only once make yourself see what a worthless, broken chap I am, you could soon do it." A poor argument, had he known it, about the worst he could have employed to use to a woman whose heart was bursting with its passion of love and pity. "I am not worth a thought from anyone, as I have told you often enough."

"It is no use telling me. Words are no power against feelings. I can't, Dick, do as you say. I have been lying awake all through the night thinking of all you said about not seeing me again. And I can't—not yet. I only want to see you sometimes; if I do not it will only make me think the more. I shall get stronger if I see you. If you keep away I shall

fret myself ill. I shall die! I will try to do as you tell me, but the sight of you will help me, make me strong, encourage me. Just now and then, Dick. That is not much to spare me out of your lifetime." She looked at him piteously through the mist of chill rain which swept between them.

"Rose," he said, his voice so deep as to be almost indistinct, "are you sure, though, that it will help you, seeing me? You know it is no help to me. You are asking me something almost beyond my strength to grant. It is like—it is like the fires of purgatory to me, but still, if it will make your life happier, if you are sure, then——"

A light broke over her face, sunshine after a shower. She saw the glittering rainbow of promise in his softening eyes, and her heart leapt up to meet it. A sudden gust of wind drove the rain again between them and whisked her blue serge skirt with a heavy flick against his wet coat. He drew her into shelter and touched her wet hair with his hand.

"Then that is to be it?" he said, trying to smile cheerfully at her. "There is that account to settle, too, between you and me. Oh, yes, little girl, don't look like that. I must pay up. I don't mean to start debts the moment I come back to civilisation. So when I come up to London I am to come and see you. But all the same try to forget me if you can. I am going

home now to eat the dish of roasted veal with the sauce of repentance."

"Rose, my dear," puffed a breathless voice half way up the companion, "I have been searching for you everywhere."

"Oh, Dick, good-bye, good-bye!" came one final gasp, as the Collector of Poggulpore's portly form, in very much undress garb, hove into sight.

"Damn it all!" Urquhart said moodily to himself, as he turned on his heel and went off to tardily carry out Mrs. Vivian's commissions.

At last! On English soil once more!

Oh, weary hearts of exiles, how the dull pang of "Heimweh" is lulled to rest as the awakening pulses throb in passionate response to that first thrill of joy!

It overwhelmed Dick Urquhart for the moment as he stepped on to the mud of Southampton Harbour. And there among the crowd of eager expectants on the quay, was his father, pressing forward to reach him, oblivious of the rain and the general cold discomfort of the long, tedious wait.

Dick saw again, as he had never hoped to do, the well-remembered face, older now, with deep lines round the eyes and mouth, the hair white now, but the smile as bright as ever, the eyes still keen and fearless, the face and straight, clean-cut figure of an English gentleman, with an outlook on the world bespeaking the gallant, still youthful heart beneath.

"Dick, my boy, my boy, indeed! Thank God for this!"

Hand clasped hand in a grip which supplied all the words neither dared trust himself to speak. The elder man recovered his composure first, and began the matter-of-fact enquiry about luggage as they extricated themselves from the restless crowd. There was an unusual air of bustle about him, as though he wanted to be up and doing, to work off thereby, perhaps, a superfluity of emotion.

"I've not got much in that line, sir," said Dick with a short laugh, which he hoped covered the "confounded huskiness" in his throat—occasioned by the damp, of course.

A cab rolled past them as they stood there; some of the mud from the wheels flew out on to Dick's coat. A dog barked out through the window. Rose and her husband were borne on up the street. Dick caught the gleam of her hair, and still heard the angry remonstrances of Nipper, who was energetically, but with poor show of worldly discretion, declaiming his desire to get out and join that wet figure in the muddy road in preference to the more comfortable quarters of his mistress's lap.

But there was one painful task to be got through before Urquhart was free to go his way: that *widow* to meet and to place in her hands the precious packet, the message from the dead. She bore up bravely after that first awful hour in the ugly, strange, unsympathetic

room of the hotel whither Dick had conducted her. The rain beat furiously now against the big, bare-looking windows, and the wind, as it swept gustily by, sent puffs of smoke down the chimney from the newly-lit, feeble fire, out into the room, adding to the discomfort and dreariness of it all.

They sat together on a hard, slippery, leather couch, and stared at an uncompromising square table, covered with a crude green cloth, elaborately embroidered in gaudy gold silks.

It was all very terrible, and Urquhart's soft heart ached with longing to help this sad-faced, broken-hearted woman. But what could he do? Comfort there was none—at least, he had none to offer her. Had she known it, the young soldier sitting there beside her was in greater need of comfort than she would ever be. He could only hold the poor widowed hand tenderly in his while he told her the tiny details of those last few days. And, after all, that was the wisest comfort he could have given her.

She clung to him piteously at the end of their interview, imploring him to come and see her soon.

"When I can bear to hear it all. I shall be brave soon. I will not trouble you with useless grief, men do not like it. But just at first. . . ." Her face quivered, and she passed her handkerchief across it to still the trembling lips. "You have been kind and

patient indeed with me. God bless you and send you the happiness I am sure you deserve, and I hope will soon have"—she looked sweetly up at the comely face—"and may He, in His mercy, spare your wife the agony of widowhood."

Even in her own great trouble she noticed the sudden change that swept over Urquhart's face as he grasped the back of a chair near him, and held tightly to it with fingers that looked as if they were biting into the wood. He made no definite promise of paying her a visit. If she knew all, he thought, that invitation never would have been given.

CHAPTER XIX.

URQUHART, in the first rush of new feelings the sight of his old home brought, was able to cast off his depression. The long years of absence slipped from him, and for a space he felt free, almost light-hearted. Old associations brought back to him his boyhood, and his father's delight in his recovered son made him forget.

But only for a time ! There is no such thing as forgetfulness so long as conscience lives. By degrees a restraint rose up and crept in between father and son. Urquhart could not bring himself to talk of the latter part of those years of absence, neither could he answer the numberless questions with which his father ceaselessly plied him. His replies to them were brief, often evasive, and had a sound of curtness he himself felt and yet could not avoid or render otherwise.

The old soldier could not be other than deeply hurt at this lack of confidence—Dick had been such an open-minded, outspoken boy when he had gone away—though he tried proudly not to betray the fact. But the questioning ceased,

and the old father only eagerly listened for every word Urquhart vouchsafed.

It did not take his father long to discover that among the meagre luggage Dick had brought back with him from his long travels there was packed away a skeleton. Ah! no, this stranger from Afghanistan was not his boy Dick. *He* had gone through the Khyber, and was in verity lost to him for ever, as surely as he had long ago come to believe.

Ah, if we could only see through the eyes down into the soul, what misunderstandings might be averted, what loneliness and misery escaped! Here, if Dick could have known it, was the very confidant he needed, strong and lenient to advise and judge. Had not he gone through the strife himself? And though he had come out with unblemished honour, still he had learnt on that battle-field of life, by many hard blows, that best lesson of all—"To know all is to forgive all!" But that was just it. Dick did not know. He went on his way missing the help, and his father drew back chilled. The breach widened until there could never be made a bridge to span it.

There had been one piece of good news awaiting him. An old godfather had died and left him a few hundreds a year, so Dick would not be called on to face poverty again. If it had only come years ago, how different it all might have been!

The quiet country life did Urquhart good at first, but soon the demon of unrest was on the alert again, and the calm commonplace existence began to grow unbearable. His brothers had all gone from the home roof, and were scattered the globe over. His favourite sister had married, too, and gone away. She wrote a pressing invitation to him to go and see her. He went, but only to return before a week was over, utterly convinced that it would be impossible to adapt himself to these new creatures who had taken the place of the old familiar ones he had left behind. He had parted from her a merry tomboy, his willing participator in every mischievous outburst; he found her a demure little matron, wrapped up in her home, and with not an idea in her head beyond her husband, her housekeeping, and her babies. She lamented to her husband the alteration in "dear old Dick," but it never crossed her mind to try to throw herself into his life and so find out the cause of these alternating fits of moodiness and restlessness.

Soon, too, there came a letter of welcome and eager invitation from Mackenzie. Urquhart accepted it, in the desperate hope that here at least he might find help and a comprehending sympathy. They had been such a David and Jonathan in the old subaltern days, perhaps—Ah, how he held on to the thought that here he would grasp a strong steady hand of comrade-

ship to pull him out of the slough before he sank for ever.

But—his old chum had truly “married a wife.”

Mrs. Mackenzie was as warm in her welcome as her husband, and Urquhart soon saw that his friend had known what he had been about when he had waited so contentedly for his “girl.” They were wrapped up in each other, not foolishly before people, but Urquhart knew from the first moment he entered the wee home that he had lost his friend.

Not to this doting husband could he tell the pitiable story of his perfidy and seek his advice. The peccadilloes of their youth had been left behind long ago. Captain Mackenzie never alluded to the days of subaltern Guy, and promptly quenched his friend's first essay at a “Do you remember?” Oh, no! Captain Mackenzie was now a seriously professional officer, all his thoughts centred in his wife, his regiment, and his future advancement for her sake.

Dick Urquhart went back home saddened and nearly hopeless.

His elder sister, who had been engaged to be married when he had left England, had fallen back upon religion as consolation for a blighted life. She was widowed without ever having tasted the crowning bliss of wifehood. Her lover had been killed on the hunting field before her very eyes, almost on the eve of their wedding day.

She had gone through trouble, and had apparently found relief. Perhaps to her he could unburden himself and find comfort in sharing his secret, maybe consolation where she had discovered it. But Dick had all an Englishman's reserve about speaking on any subject at all approaching the emotional, and Florence Urquhart was not one to invite confidence spontaneously.

He had been out one morning before breakfast, strolling aimlessly about in the fresh, lovely spring air, and as he came round the corner from the stables he caught sight of a bend in the road which led up from the village, along which his sister was slowly coming, swinging her gloves in her uncovered hands, and gazing meditatively at the skimming white clouds.

"By Jove! Floss up to this sort of thing!" putting a very natural construction upon such a movement. "Who'd have thought it?" he said to himself, as he flicked the stones on the pathway with his stick and went out of the gate to meet her.

"Hallo, Flo!" he called out, as he joined her. "Who would have expected to see you about at this hour? Complexion business, is it? Early dew and all that sort of thing; or is it t'other thing—eh?" Elegant construction of language had never been Dick's strong point.

He spoke teasingly, but she was not adaptable by nature, and did not meet his spirit of fun.

His appearance, besides, to her surface-judging eyes, was not one she could approve of. He wore an old shabby coat, unearthed from some old press, comfortable enough and satisfying to his small demands upon fashion; but the clothes, combined with the short black pipe and general air of haggardness about his face—for there were traces of the past there which never would be obliterated—jarred on her present exalted mood.

She did not answer.

“It’s jolly for a mouch round this morning, Flokins, isn’t it?” he went on, unconsciously using the old boyish name for her. “After all, disabuse it as we will, there is no climate like an English one; but, perhaps, I’m prejudiced just now in my decision. Why didn’t you let me know you were going out? I was only round at the stables having a chat with Joe——” He caught her glance and read it correctly. His face fell a little, the momentary flash of brightness, like a gleam of lingering boyhood, which the brisk pure air and gentle harmonies of Nature had brought there, died out. “You think I look it?” he said, with a vexed little laugh. “H’m, well, I suppose I do look a bit out at elbows and generally disreputable. I must run up to town one of these days and get furbished up a bit, but——” He viciously switched at the hedge with his stick.

How he dreaded that going to London, that

chance meeting of old friends, all of whom would have advanced in their careers since he had seen them last, all higher up the rungs of the ladder of Fame, winning respect, some even honour, while he——

No whisper could come out through the jaws of that darksome Pass to tell of deeds of bravery and daring he had done, of a hard life manfully endured; and of himself he could not speak, even if that heavy secret had not closed his lips.

He gave a sigh and puffed hard at his pipe.

Here was a chance at hand for her to do the daily service that lies in wait for each of us, but, alas! her thoughts had flown away on the wings of music, the strains from the matins still tickled her ears, and she was roaming through an elysium of lofty ideals and unearthly beings, while—a lame dog halted at the stile.

She passed on, and did not see the lift she might have given.

“Where have you been for your walk? Who is the attraction, Flokins, for of course there is a somebody, eh?”

Not a smile crossed his sister's cold passionless face; no pretty blush came to her cheeks at his mischievous insinuation; no responsive sally to his little joke.

“I wish, Dick, you would not call me by that utterly stupid name! There is neither sense nor dignity in it. I prefer Florence, please.”

"Oh, I beg your pardon, I didn't know," said Dick hurriedly.

The silence that he dreaded threatened to fall between them again. But she volunteered a speech this time.

"I have been to matins," she said, with a faint air of superiority in her voice. "We have a most fervent man here now, and the frequent services are a great solace and help."

Dick walked on beside her, musing.

She *had* altered! Everyone had altered. Or was it he, himself, who had changed so that his square corners could no longer fit in these smooth round holes? Flokins getting up to go to church before breakfast! Flo knowing anything about fervour and frequent services!

He had known her in the old days getting up in the dawn of a cold grey day, and tearing off on horseback after a scampered-through breakfast. Oh, yes, she had done that often with him, but then it had been to attend a meet of the hounds, not an assembly at church!

He could see her now, coming home in the evening, splashed with mud and rampantly enthusiastic; fervent, as she had comically used the word herself a moment ago, but not from evensong. Great Scot! no.

He looked at her critically—at the upright figure with the slightly dogmatic set of the square shoulders, at the unmoved, unemotional face, and he wondered vaguely about it all.

What had this done for her? Had she found rest and satisfaction in it? Might he also find relief from this ceaseless gnawing at the vitals of his conscience?

It was so difficult to make a start, and she "didn't help a poor devil a bit." She looked so like a mediæval saint in a painted window, so wrapped up in something where he had no part or lot.

"Flo"—he could not bring out that big mouthful of a Florence—"come round the garden. Don't go in just yet, it is so jolly. And I want to talk to you."

"Well, only a few minutes, then, Dick. I must go in to make the coffee for breakfast. I always look after it myself," she explained, precisely, "and I always commence at five minutes to nine."

That did not sound encouraging.

Oh, if she had only been able to see the hand that was desperately stretched out to her from the dark sea of despair which surged all about him, sucking him down into its strong, resistless under-currents!

But no. She walked uncompromisingly beside him, humming a Gregorian chant. It was very minor in setting, and neither particularly tuneful nor cheerful.

"I don't want to touch on bygones, Flo—Florence—or do anything to make old wounds bleed," he began, apologetically, "but I have

been wondering. Did you take to this sort of thing as consolation to drown other thoughts, you know, when that poor chap"—he pulled himself up—"when Cyril Cartwright died?"

"*This sort of thing?*" She turned upon him with such a look of non-comprehension in her eyes as almost to amount to scorn—at least, so he read the cold, unsympathetic glance.

"Oh, well, I put it clumsily; I mean—er, well, er—this church-going, meeting sort of business—religion, I suppose you call it? Did it help you, Flo—Florence? Tell me about it."

It *was* clumsily worded, as he had said, but had she only had the great ineffable gift of human sympathy and the rapid discernment it brings, and which is about the best and truest gift that can be given to mortal, she would have heard the cry for help, for succour, wrung from him in his sore need. That clumsy construction of the nervous sentences spoke the half-shy, half-pathetic appeal for comprehension more surely than the most elaborately-worded speech.

She looked up at the tree-tops, where their green-leaved branches swayed against the unfathomable blue of space. But he was calling from the depths, and so the cry did not reach her.

"You talk as if such a subject could be dealt with in an ordinary five-minutes' conversation,

Dick. You must surely have thought all these things out for yourself before now. You learned long ago the great plan of salvation—the articles of our faith that direct us how to steer through this temporary life so that we may gain our soul's eternal life. Religion, as you call it, is the means to that end. The services you affect to despise are like the finger-posts to direct us on our road. Those are what we must study; those are what our church gives us."

"Hang it all, Flo, a fellow can't mark time to study finger-posts when he is on a forced march. Lots of finger-posts get overlooked or left behind unnoticed. As for my soul's salvation—Blow my soul! I can leave that to the One who made it. I want something that will keep a fellow from doing harm to other people's souls."

"But it is our own salvation that we must work out, each one for himself," said Florence, with her cold voice enunciating the cut-and-dried platitude.

"Well, Flo, somehow that does not appeal to me; that is not what I want. And I don't know that selfishness improves by being eternal. It won't stand the strain of a man's life—anyway, not a soldier's, when he comes into contact with creeds of every nation, some of them more sublime and philosophical than this narrow one of eternal selfishness."

"But if we each strive to save our own soul,

we must be doing good to those in contact with us."

"Ah, but when a fellow has slipped and got the smirch of sin on his soul, and——" He stopped for a moment, and looked at her in that peculiar wistful sort of way that still had in it so much of hunger. Dare he go further, she was so unresponsive?—"and may blacken another life, perhaps lives, he wants a present remedy, not a future sugarplum for being a good boy."

"But what do you mean, Dick?" she said, and there was almost a suggestion of shrinking in her attitude towards him, as if she drew away the hem of her narrow morality from contact with that hint at possible "smirch." Sin in the abstract she had heard of and prayed about in a vague, indefinite way. Sin looking out of a companion's eyes, likely at any moment to be exposed in all its naked ugliness, she shrank from visibly. "Don't talk like that; it sounds dreadful—improper!"

"Ah, Flo," he said, and his voice was sadly dreary, "a doctor does not say a disease is improper when the sufferer calls to him for help. He doesn't give him dogmas; he lays a cool hand of healing on the spot, and tells him what to do. Can't you tell me something? You have been studying the subject diligently."

"I don't think you would understand, Dick," she said, still in her cold, regular tones, "either

the subject or its benefits. Perhaps if you spoke to Mr. Gresham"—(Florence Urquhart was not of the modern type of young woman who seeks to be acquainted with the shifting scenes of "a man's past," she preferred the more secure ground of perfect ignorance)—"he could treat the matter with a freedom that I should not care to court. Or I could lend you books to read; but I don't think that this is much in your line," she ended, summing up with sweeping decision what she knew nothing of and would never understand.

Dick cut off the head of a dahlia with one fell swoop of his stick, and sent the blood-red flower spinning through the air to its death.

"Thank you, Flo, but I'll not trouble Mr. Gresham, whoever he may be, and reading isn't in my line. I'm a bad lot, and I suppose a bad lot I'll have to remain. It's all right, and you had better go and see about the coffee. I don't want to put your breakfast arrangements out, old girl."

That first attempt threw him back, chilled to the very core of his heart. As well seek for help from a stone wall as hope to find any in the stiff stilted phrases she would launch at him. He had sought to touch a warm, compassionate woman's heart, and he had been offered—a book!

Her narrow-minded conventionalities had choked him off just as assuredly as his wider

views and lax laws would have shocked her. Conversation, therefore, between them, except on the most surface matters, grew to be impossible.

The last hope had died then, like a door slamming in his face, to which he had neither latch-key nor passport. As he sauntered back to the house, with but little appetite for the due appreciation of this carefully prepared coffee, he knew that he "was all wrong somehow." He had failed to adapt himself to his environments, as Herbert Spencer has it. One cannot live in that state, that is death. Therefore, life to him must mean something different from this present state, where he was out of touch with everyone and everything, and where the isolation here seemed worse than the loneliness there.

Amusements began to bore him utterly.

The quiet pottering about on horseback through the sleepy country lanes, discussing crops with his father, listening to remarks anent the church, the schools, the almshouses and cottagers, from his sister, was not *riding* !

Oh, for one wild dash over those rugged Afghan mountains, with the strong wind blowing in his face and the excitement of a tumultuous fray before him !

It slowly resolved itself into one thought—he could not stay in England. The trammels of so-called civilisation bored him to frenzy point. He must explain to his father that he must find

some active employment as speedily as possible or he would begin, like Sir Hudibras' sword—

“To eat into himself for lack
Of something else to hew and hack.”

He was returning leisurely—it was always leisurely, Dick ruefully thought—one morning with his father and sister, from a long dull ramble on horseback along the countryside. He had been half listening, though entirely uninterested, to a long, and to him utterly ridiculous and futile, discussion on some church matters.

It sounded all Greek to Urquhart, as, indeed, it would have done to anyone not versed in the minutiae of ecclesiastical matters. What on earth, Urquhart thought, could it matter what the man wore so long as he did his work? But apparently to Florence it appeared to be as if the salvation of souls depended upon the exact adjustment of a vestment, or the correct use of a vessel.

While the conversation had been going on, he had been living through again those free, untrammelled talks on the lonely tower top with the old Mahomedan and the twinkling stars as companions—talks when he had felt he had indeed touched the very threshold of a Holy of Holies, whose vast boundless limit knew no border-line of convention, but which reached wide enough to take in all creeds and phases of

life, whose laws demanded only loyalty of heart and single-mindedness of purpose.

As he walked his horse dispiritedly along, the idea suddenly seized him to get back to the East—somehow, anyhow, away from these despicable conventionalities and twaddle, back to—Zorayda.

A hunger for her awoke in him; she knew none of these narrowing society codes and rules, she was bound by no law but his—he was her God, her law-giver, her idol! Fool that he had been ever to leave her.

Surely some diplomatic service could be found for him. His father's influence, backed by his own good character from his regiment, and his almost perfect colloquial knowledge of Persian, Pushtoo, and Hindostani, together with a large smattering of Arabic and minor dialects, ought to be able to work out something.

At any rate he would try.

For this purpose he went up to London and began to haunt the Foreign Office.

CHAPTER XX

THE slight prospect of work to do (though naturally Urquhart's eager hopefulness magnified the scant chance into speedy certainty), offering release from this enforced idleness, cheered him wonderfully. He began to feel better at once, mentally and physically.

He had yet to learn that appointments are not as plentiful as blackberries, and that the Offices of State are worked by a machinery which has a permanent drag on its wheels, that no amount of importunity or desire can lighten.

He began, too, to meet old friends, and to respond gradually to their cordial welcomes and hospitalities, but through it all, though he felt perhaps one degree less miserable, the sense of isolation never really left him.

It was strong upon him one morning as he turned away from the Foreign Office and struck out across the Green Park. He had looked in at the Office only to be met with disappointment. Everybody was not in such a hurry as he was.

But it was such a glorious day in early summer

that, despite the hold it had upon him, the sun began to disperse his depression. A springiness came into his step and a lightness into his heart.

It had rained the night before, and the newly washed verdure gleamed brilliantly in the sunlight. The air blew soft and balmy, laden with the odour of a hundred flowers. London looked as only London can look on a glorious morning in midsummer.

Urquhart crossed the wide road and entered Hyde Park. A crowd of leisurely time-killers was about the broad slope round the statue of Achilles, and extended out along the tempting shady walks by the Row. A detachment of the Guards came down the half-shaded road and passed out under the Arch. Urquhart watched them with interest, the dignified step of the highly-groomed black chargers, the rigid sit of the soldiers, with the plumes of their helmets waving, and their cuirasses and helmets gleaming and glittering in the morning sun. Carriages were driving thickly past, and he waited aimlessly at the corner by the lodge until he could cross to the other side. He had no particular reason for crossing, but a group happened to have congregated by the opening in the rails, and he joined them and went whither they went. The policeman gave the signal, and there followed the usual scatter of bewildered nursemaids and children, with the more dignified gait of some handsomely attired women.

When he had reached the other side, and found himself one of the immaculately clothed throng gathered there, he did not know wherein he had bettered himself or why he had come there at all.

Some men leaned over the railings, languidly discussing the latest betting for Sandown, interlarding their resolutions with remarks upon the passers-by, complimentary or otherwise as the occasion, or rather object, called forth.

Urquhart took up his stand near them. How out of it all he was ! When had he last been care-proof enough to enter with gusto into such a fire of frivolous chatter ?

A perfectly appointed Victoria drew slowly up under the trees. There was a gleam of golden hair, the swift flutter of a parasol, a jingle of bangles, and he was once more holding Rose's hand in his. He was no longer outside of everything.

It would not have been human nature for him not to feel a quickening of the pulses at the joy which shone in her beautiful eyes as she turned her welcoming face to meet his glance. He had been feeling only one moment before so cut off from this life around him, that perhaps the reaction made his greeting warmer than it would have been if he had paused to reflect.

He had been in London a fortnight, and he had forced himself to put off from day to day calling upon her, trying to make himself believe

that he was not in the same town with her, nor breathing the same air, not standing the chance of meeting her at any moment. And, after all, it had come about in such an easy, inconsequential manner that he was off his guard. Delight predominated over precaution.

Rose had altered. He noticed that at once as he stepped into the carriage beside her, in response to her eager invitation. He looked more closely at her as they drove along, and though he detected the subtle difference at every turn, he could not quite come to a conclusion wherein it lay. She seemed to be more beautiful than ever, but fine feathers could account for that. Every item of her dress was perfect, and in the most exquisite taste. Rose had become more worldly-wise than he guessed. She had studied in a school of suffering, and the scholars learn quickly there.

She had pondered deeply during these weeks while he had been away from her, going over and over again all that had taken place between them. She knew that he had become a necessity to her. She could not face the future without him. At the same time she also realised that if she would hold him she must change.

She felt that lying dormant—yes, dormant, but not yet dead, and which might be stirred to fresh life at any moment—was that craving for the higher, nobler life a man should live—the life, in fact, of which she was no part.

If she had been strong and brave she would have torn him out of her heart, even if it had wrenched her very life with it. She would have sent him from her, bidden him go away free, and urged him to strive to get straight once more with his conscience and his God.

But Rose Elliott was not strong. She was very young still, and life for her had been hard—was yet hard. She was only one of the many, many poor, foolish daughters of the first weak mother of us all who put out their hands to take the forbidden fruit, only to discover when too late that they have not gained their Paradise in return for what they have forfeited; they have, indeed, lost it, and must for ever starve and perish on the ashes of their Dead Sea fruit.

“How long you have been away!” she said, after a little while. “Has the country been very delightful? And the veal, was it very toothsome?”

“Ah, Rose!” was all he said.

“I have been ruralising too,” she went on quickly to cover her false step and get back to safer ground. “John and I went down into Devonshire, for me to be introduced to my people-in-law, you know. They had not seen John’s wife before. We came to a mutual conclusion before a fortnight was over that Devonshire did not suit my nerves. I came back to London to recover. John is still feasting on junket, cream, and fresh strawberries. He is

coming up soon. Won't he be a lively companion while he is recovering from the effects of that sumptuous faring ! I hear from him daily, the most uxorious effusions, which I answer in a weekly Sunday edition."

"Rose," Urquhart said hastily, "I don't understand. Do you mean you are staying in London alone ?"

"Not at this moment. I was alone—at least no, not alone. My maid is with me, and Nipper. You remember poor sick Elise on the voyage ? She and Nipper are somewhere in the Park now. And why not ?" she put in hurriedly, in reply to the look she saw coming on his face. "I am living in Bolton Street. John took rooms there when we arrived, and I suppose we shall keep them on as a *pied-à-terre*. It was very dull at first, but better than Coombe Metlowe. I don't know anyone, and Elise—well, she found it pretty dull too until she got a young man, one of the footmen in the hotel. It is a private hotel sort of arrangement where I'm living. I had not the same opportunity of amusing myself, as, unfortunately, I was born in a rank where young men don't turn up at every step."

"Rose," he said sternly, "don't. I don't like to hear you talk like that."

"Oh ! it's better now," she replied, wilfully misunderstanding him. "I am no longer alone. Gerry is here with me. He's my young brother, you know. He is going in for Sandhurst. He

is very condescending, and takes me about when he can spare the time on such an unimportant person as a sister. He has such a 'doosid lot of engagements, don't you know,' that I don't see very much of him. I've been to Hurlingham. I don't think much of that, perhaps because people stared a good deal. I'm sure I don't know why."

Urquhart watched the flushed dainty face, thought he knew, and he consigned the worthy Collector of Poggulpore to torment.

"And we went on the river; that was awfully nice. In the evenings we have been to a comic opera or two. Gerry's tastes are not of a high-class order; a theatre, except very broad comedy, is beyond him. Last night we went to the 'Empire.' My clothes are hanging about all over the place to air. They were smoke-dried."

He was staring at her, astonishment growing stronger on his face at every word she said.

"*You went to the Empire!* Rose, Mr. Elliott must be mad. Gorging down in Devonshire while his wife is trusted to the care of a young fool of a cub. Confound him! I'd like to give that brother of yours a piece of my mind."

Rose laughed.

"It wouldn't be a bad idea, Dick. It might get him through Sandhurst, for he certainly has none of his own to assist him."

"I didn't mean that sort of mind, Rose, and

you know that quite well," he said, and his voice was very stern.

"No," she said lightly, feigning not to notice his very evident consternation at her behaviour.

"It isn't very amusing, Dick, the 'Empire,' I mean, though Gerry persuaded me to go because he said it was 'rattling good fun.' He told me to dress in black, and I put on a black velvet cloak over my evening gown. That was rather a stupid thing to have done, for smoke clings so to velvet. Of course, also, I did not understand that the air would be smoke itself. The ballets were very marvellous, but one gets a little wearied of their brilliance. I don't think Gerry cared very much for them either, for he generally went out of the box into some other part of the house when they were on. He took a stroll, he said."

"And you?" said Urquhart, his voice still ominously deep, and the strongest disfavour showing on his face.

"I? Oh, I sat still in my seat and waited till the end. Then there were some clever performing dogs. I liked them, only I was so sorry for the poor things. I gave Nipper a gorgeous supper when I got home to ease my conscience. And there were some men, made of india-rubber apparently, who did a lot of joint-breaking manœuvres. Then a girl came on to sing, and——"

"Hush, Rose, for Heaven's sake! It is too horrible!"

He had been wriggling and fidgetting in his seat during her calm, expressionless recital of her occupations during these days of marital solitude, but his wrath and disgust could be held in bounds no longer.

"It is too utterly atrocious to be endured! To think of you breathing that atmosphere."

"Ah!" laughed Rose lightly, "that remark betrays your want of education. You have not been to the 'Empire,' or you would know that there is no *atmosphere* there to breathe. One gulps smoke at every breath."

"You know quite well what I mean, Rose," he went on, too furious to attempt to control his voice or manner. "The very thought of your mixing with people of that sort!"

"But, Dick," she argued with wilful persistence, "you see, you don't understand the arrangements at that region of varied entertainment. We didn't mix at all—at least I didn't," she added veraciously. "We sat in a box, Gerry called it, all to ourselves. It was a box, I know, for I gave him two guineas to pay for it. He went out now and then, but I sat there all the time. It wasn't much fun, especially when I was left in solitary state. But nothing is much fun. I almost think I enjoyed myself more before he came."

"Oh, indeed!" said Urquhart grimly, squirm-

ing again in anticipation of fresh horrors about to be revealed, and of which, though his blood boiled in contemplation of what he might expect, he yet could not forego hearing. "And what, pray, did you do then?"

"Oh! it won't interest you nearly so much as the music-hall part of my story. Men dote on music-halls, I know. Well, I used to shop until I got tired of buying things I did not want, and could never by any possibility use. The rooms were lumbered with rubbish. Then I amused myself going about to shops and finding out how much cheaper it is to buy Indian things here in England than to bring them over. Why, Dick, I might have saved quite a hoard if I had only known. And"—with a sly little smile at him—"not encumbered myself with that pile of troublesome baggage."

"Well?" he said, with no answering smile, "go on."

"One day we went to Kew Gardens by boat, Elise and I. We had tea there, strawberries and cream, out in the grounds at a little table with heaps of small tables all round us and crowds of people feasting likewise—just like John was feasting down at Coombe Metlowe. Elise had learnt the way to Kew, and that it was part of the Kew Garden programme to go and take tea *al fresco*, because that young man of hers had taken her there the Sunday previously, and she had been full of it, talking all

about the palms in glass houses, and the heat that felt just like India. Another time—— Does this rubbish really interest you, Dick? You look so funny, as if you were listening, and yet all the while as if you wanted—as if you would like to chop off somebody's head. Would you like to be occupying yourself with some such blood-thirsty amusement?"

"Go on, Rose," he said, more grimly still.

"What was I saying before I began about the head-chopping business? There is a riddle about heads and chops, isn't there, Dick? I used to hear it at school. It was a horrid thing, I know; it had something to do with King Charles, and I used to adore Charles the First at school. Ah, yes, that reminds me. I went over to South Kensington one day. I had a fancy that I should like to know what it would feel like to be at school once more. So I tried to pretend that I was only seventeen and a school-girl again. I bought a very simple little cotton gown and an equally simple hat, because, you know, Dick, when I was at school I used to be quite poor. I remember the numbers of letters mamma used to write to me to lecture me on my extravagance when I overran my allowance. So I dressed quite meanly that I might be able to feel the impecunious school-girl again. I pulled off all my rings and bangles, and everything that I hadn't then, and I only wore a little silver pin

I had—oh, ages ago! Dick!——” She interrupted herself again, and turned to him with a sudden flashing movement that rather disturbed the taut grip he had on himself. “Have you ever tried to think you are young again—really young in thought, and feeling, and desire? Oh, when you do—if you ever think of doing such a foolish thing, don’t—it does make it seem such ages and ages ago!—something quite gone away into a past, and it ends in showing you that you are not that person at all that you thought you were. The changes they tell us that take place every seven years have indeed been so effectual that not one vestige of the old you is left.”

She looked away under the lace of her parasol to the misty distance of the wide spread of park on their left and did not speak for some minutes. The blatant music of a German band reached their ears, mingling with, but not drowned by, the roar and hum of traffic; some riders passed near them with a thud of hoofs and the echo of a gay laugh as they flashed past.

“I want to hear about that day too, Rose,” said Urquhart, at last, and his voice had lost some of its grimness and taken a gentler tone.

“That day! Oh, yes.”

Her thoughts had evidently strayed far away, and he thought he felt her give a slight start as his words broke the silence.

“Let me see; yes, I was saying that I tried

to believe I was a school-girl again, and only seventeen, and with just a few shillings in my purse. But it wasn't easy to imagine such a thing. Rose Yorke was such a long way off, I had nearly forgotten her, or how she used to feel. Well, I found the school and then I started out to buy some tuckers, just like we used to do on Saturday mornings, and some ribbon for my hair, and of course some sweets and stamps. We always wanted sweets and stamps, I remember, especially sweets. The last term I was at school I used to be allowed occasionally to shop alone because mamma had written to say that she would like me to learn to be sensible and independent, so I used to go with Mademoiselle who could not talk English, and I had to be purchaser myself. Only of course this time I had no Mademoiselle." She felt the man at her side give one of those impulsive jerks in his seat as though he found his position uncomfortable. "I went alone, I bought frills and ribbons, and flowers off a woman in the street, and some sweets, and then I had two ices, which was great extravagance, far greater than I really could have afforded as school-girl, Rose Yorke, I mean, not as Rose Elliott! Rose Yorke! Oh, Dick!"

Her voice broke, and the last words were a wail. All of a sudden the light died out of her face, the brilliant flush of excitement her chatter had brought there faded, a hard line

took the curve from the sweet lips and made them old-looking and no longer girlish—the little girl had gone back into that past she had been striving to recall, and the woman, heart-sore and world-weary already, had come back and was sitting there leaning listlessly on the dark blue cloth of the carriage.

“Rose, dear little girl!” said Dick softly, almost huskily, “all this is very bad for you—morbid and unwholesome.”

“Yes, Dick, I found that out too. It does not do to face oneself with the past—it isn’t—it isn’t flattering! I decided to leave Rose Yorke alone after that. She had been so happy, and she used so to count on a future that of course would be happy too. Now she has reached the future and—she dare not look back nor forward. Well, let us put it away. Now tell me all you have been doing down in the country.”

Oh, how comforting it was to talk to her again! How entirely at ease he felt with her. *She* did not trouble about his past, she never plied him with embarrassing, unanswerable questions, nor made him uncomfortable by looks, or, worse than all, by silences pregnant with doubts.

She had taken it for granted that she herself constituted his past, just as he constituted hers. The future? Well, it remained to be seen who would supply the future. Somehow, John Elliott, Collector of Poggulpore, important

factor as he undoubtedly was in a certain far-away Province of Her Imperial Majesty's Empire, never entered into these calculations, either retrospectively or prospectively.

Yes, Urquhart thought, as he strolled back to his chambers in St. James' Street, after seeing Mrs. Elliott safely deposited in Bolton Street, it was decidedly comfortable and comforting to be with her again. How lovely she was! Her delicate mobile features seemed to be more beautiful than ever, her hair shone with a gold no other head carried; how luminous was the glow in her soft eyes as she had parted with him at the door, begging him to come soon and to take her somewhere nice. As it anywhere would not be "nice" if he went with her!

He was more wholly under her spell than ever, for this bright new Rose, who had bloomed with a fresh, more brilliant radiance during his absence, was more alluring even than the drooping flower he had so carefully tended on the voyage home.

He called for her in the afternoon, when he made the acquaintance of Mr. Gerard Sherringham Yorke, otherwise "Gerry," a boy who was such a ridiculous reproduction of Rose that Urquhart fairly stared at him. But Mr. Gerard Yorke was accustomed to that, only, it must be admitted, the looks generally were bestowed by members of the opposite sex, and were naturally more appreciated.

They drove down to Hurlingham and spent a merry time there, and Rose to-day never noticed that no one came to speak to her, nor did she feel any longing for, nor envy about, the crowd of acquaintances that most of the ladies seemed to have following in their wake.

Urquhart called for them again in the evening, and they went to a theatre together and saw a good play, which bored Gerry to extinction, but which gave Rose some real enjoyment.

And after that Urquhart might have been seen in Bolton Street every day, and many times often during each day.

Gerry condescendingly handed his sister over to Urquhart's charge, as if he were getting rid of an insuperable encumbrance, and went his own way in gleeful freedom.

And how could Urquhart refuse the responsibility, even had he had the wish to do so, when he remembered how Rose had spent the time when she had been alone?

His visits to the Foreign Office fell off in consequence. The ardour of his desire cooled a little during those days of blissful floating with the stream, and he did not let himself look ahead to see the breakers where they would surely one day founder.

As his mornings came to be most frequently spent in the Row with Rose, and sometimes honoured by Gerry's company too, exercising

one or other of the Collector's horses considerably for him, the impetuous figure did not so regularly appear striding down Whitehall as heretofore, on its way to the sombre grey building that held his future destiny.

His days came to be filled with Rose. He constantly planned some fresh amusement for her and then called to take her to it. He rarely went into the house, except merely to fetch her at the exact time he had appointed for her to be ready for him. He had made a point of that from the very outset, and, perhaps, she comprehended the feeling he had about it, for she never pressed him to go against what were evidently his desires.

That vein in his character, that certain careless, thoughtless shifting, which had caused him in the past to let things drift, until he had ruined his career, had come to the surface again. It had been for a time buried beneath the stony rocks of his hard, desperate life, but here it showed once more, and just at the moment when it was about the most unfavourable that could have been.

He did not think, too, what all this might be doing to Rose. He did not pause to find out the cause for this wonderful spell of happiness she seemed to have entered upon, and that made her once more like the brilliant little sweetheart of his subaltern days.

His "White Rose" had bloomed for him afresh, and he never stopped to calculate what

the consequences might be when the sunshine of his presence, which had caused it so to blossom out, should be removed.

To that parting he never by word or hint alluded. Time enough to tell her when something more definite had been settled. Why make her unhappy now with the forecast of an event as yet on the knees of the gods, and seemingly likely to remain there?

Sometimes, now and then, there would come a moment when he had a sudden pang. A hideous flash of lightning would shoot across his sky, revealing in its glare those rocks ahead, those swirling, sucking undercurrents, then it would be gone, and he was on the smooth stream again, with the idle drifting *dolce far niente* to lull all disturbing qualms to rest.

He would shut that hideous picture away from his mental vision, smother down those distressing qualms, and go to Rose. As long as he could he would make her happy, and the knowledge that he was doing that lulled his uneasiness to rest—when it came, which was but seldom.

It was cruel, cruel kindness, but that he did it out of the softness, nay, verily, weakness of his heart, must never be doubted.

Poor wavering, soft-hearted Dick! Poor, poor little White Rose of Peshawur!

CHAPTER XXI.

URQUHART sat dawdling over his breakfast in his room. He had the habit of early rising, contracted through his Eastern mode of living, and now he found at nine o'clock that he was much too early for the customs around him.

He had been for a stroll in the Park, but he had not seen Rose, nor had he seen her yesterday, having spent the day at Portsmouth with his gunner brother. It seemed an eternity since he had seen her, and he looked restlessly at the clock. Quite impossible to go and call in Bolton Street for another hour and a half. What should he do to pass the interminable minutes?

There had been no message from the Foreign Office among the few letters the morning's post had brought him. Should he walk down there presently?

As he wavered doubtfully, the servant came up to announce—

“Mr. Yorke!” and Gerry's fair, ingenious countenance appeared close behind.

"Hallo, old fellow," he said, with the assumption of easy familiarity that always tickled Urquhart immensely, "you're up betimes! Slaying the early worm? Oh, no, I see it's kidneys!" looking at the remains on the dish.

"Yes, will you join me? I'll soon get up something fresh and hot for you, and I can recommend the coffee."

"Oh, no, thanks, the gee's outside. I promised Rose I'd call round to see if you would join us on the river. We are going ruralising for the day, another chap and I, and Rose wants to come. You'll find it deadly slow, but she has set her heart on it—you're coming to make another, so say yes. It's an innocent, Nebuchadnezzar feed sort of affair, green herbs of the field, insects *ad lib.*, and all that sort of entertainment. What do you say? The old Nabob turns up to-morrow, so your humble servant decamps. Can't stand Guinea-face at any price! Lord, it's hard on Rose! But women don't seem to mind so long as they get plenty of oof, and Rose has nothing to complain of there!"

Urquhart rattled a couple of forks noisily together, and there was a portentous frown on his forehead.

"All right, Yorke!" he said irritably. "Thanks awfully for coming round. Tell Mrs. Elliott I shall be delighted. What time?"

"Well, toddle over any time, and we'll start any time. Easy's the word. Now, ta-ta! *Au river!*" And young Gerry, chuckling over his feeble attempt at a joke, which he appreciated to the full, if the hearer did not, clattered noisily down the stairs and out into the street.

Rose looked radiant and very girlish in a white linen gown and a trim sailor hat. The only spot of colour she wore was a deep red rose in the belt of her blouse. But her softly-tinted cheeks and lustrous eyes could have had no better setting than the white of her gown.

She greeted Urquhart gleefully as he came in.

"It's going to be a perfectly lovely day in every way!" she said. "Don't you think it was a charming idea of Gerry's? We are all ready, and we are taking such delicious things to eat—it will be a feast for the fairies! Gerry did the catering yesterday, and he has displayed such good taste! Mr. Cotherstone, Gerry's friend, will meet us at Paddington, and Gerry has telegraphed on to make sure of our getting two nice boats. He says we must have two boats, for four people in one boat are two too many."

There was something almost feverishly bright about her this morning as she hovered about with Elise, putting the finishing touches to the hampers.

"You must have a rose for your coat, Dick. Gerry has got one, and I'm taking one for Mr.

Cotherstone. My badge, you know, a red rose, not a white one now."

Dick watched the slim white fingers as they fingered about the lappet of his coat, the small shining head so close to his lips. His breath came quickly. How near she was to him—he could feel her breath upon his cheek—and yet how far away beyond his reach for ever!

"John comes back to-morrow," she announced *à propos* of nothing on their way to the station. "I want to enjoy to-day awfully. John doesn't like the river. He says it's damp and bad for gout, and he cannot see the pleasure of sitting crumpled up all day and eating unlimited insects, instead of having one's meals properly and comfortably on a substantial table. Ah, here we are, and there's Mr. Cotherstone watching for us! Oh, isn't it delightful! Now for the train!"

Oh, how lovely it was pulling slowly up the river with the sunlight sparkling on the water, the musical swish of the sculls, and Rose's radiant, happy face the fairest touch of beauty there!

They started off very energetically, and the two boats kept at first within speaking distance of each other, but Gerry and his friend soon voted this "too slow for anything," they meant to go in for "a pull not a crawl," and so, with a promise to "meet anon at Philippi," they bent to their oars, and vanished.

Rose and Urquhart were alone—the past buried, the future ignored, the present only with them.

They did not speak for some time after the other boat had pulled away from them. The sound of the sculls rattling in the rowlocks died away, and there followed one of those inexpressibly soothing silences, that seem to palpitate all about, as if the very heart of Nature had risen to the surface and throbbed loudly there.

A lark rose from a field and soared upwards to the sun, pouring forth one lilting stream of melody—

“A feathered frenzy with an angel's throat,
A something sweet that somewhere seems to float
’Twixt earth and sky to be a sign to men.”

Rose lay back among the cushions under the softening shade of her parasol, and let one hand drag idly through the water as the skiff slowly answered to Dick's languid exertions.

“Pull over there, Dick,” she said, breaking the silence at last, “there are some water-lilies. I should like to get them.”

He obeyed her, and they dawdled about, gathering the flowers, or resting in the shade.

The many spells of silence which fell upon them could never be oppressive to the perfect harmony of this companionship.

Speaking or silent, they were both content.

“May I smoke?” he asked, his man's materi-

alism getting the better of the romance of the situation.

"Of course! I ought to have asked you to do so long ago, but I thought you would know."

Slowly they meandered on, Urquhart just guiding the boat and urging it by a stroke now and then.

It was to be a perfect golden day of pure untouched happiness, unmarred by any doubting thought, unflecked by any shadow from past or future, a day on which no smallest cloud should cross its fair horizon.

The clouds were there, lying low and unseen, but to-day must they rise—oh no, not on just this one beautiful, happy, stolen day!

When they reached "Philippi," as Gerry had christened the appointed spot for luncheon, they found the two boys making an elaborate fuss over the setting forth of the viands.

"What an age you've been! I don't think much of your skill as an oarsman, Urquhart!" said Gerry, jeeringly. "We couldn't wait any longer. We concluded you had gone to sleep. I know Indians always do that sort of thing in the middle of the day. Come along, old woman! Jump out, and tell us where the salt and the mustard are. It's an uncommonly good spread, I think, though I say it as shouldn't."

Gerry walked approvingly round surveying with well-displayed satisfaction the tempting feast in preparation.

"Here, Cottie, you do butler, and go and stand the champagne in the water. I've piled up the cushions out of the boat as a seat for you, Rosie, and we'll lie round and do homage to the queen of the day—after we've paid attention to the victuals."

They laughed and chatted in happy, careless fashion, making merry over the very weakest joke from sheer exuberance of youth, the very joy of being alive and breathing the sweet exhilarating air.

"Let's drink to our next merry meeting!" cried Gerry, filling up the glasses.

He poured out the champagne, and nodded round to the other three, grinning expansively.

Urquhart leaned over on his elbow to touch Rose's tumbler with his own. But the arm on which he leaned slipped on the dry sward, under the sudden pressure, the glasses came together with a sharp clash, and Rose's fell.

A crisp green salad received an unaccounted-for addition to its dressing, and the tumbler fell against the rim of the bowl and broke with an ugly jar.

Gerry laughed uproariously, but no smile came to Rose's face.

"Here's another tumbler, Rose! My rare foresight prepared for such contingencies. Try again," suggested her brother, "and don't look so disturbed over it. It isn't the Edenhall goblet after all."

"No—not again. One can't do that twice. The spell is broken. I have lost my next merry meeting."

"Fudge! What sentimental stupids girls are! Urquhart, yours was the fault, make her drink again."

But the tiny cloud that had thrown a shadow over Rose, travelled across Dick's sky too.

"Never mind, Gerry, not now, another time!"

"Yes, another time!" echoed Rose.

During the drowsy heat of the afternoon they wandered about through the woods overhanging the river, sometimes all four together, still keeping up their fire of jokes and merriment, sometimes separating.

But at last Gerry and young Cotherstone grew tired of playing Robin Hood, and went off to the boats again for a race, leaving Rose and Dick alone, side by side in the sweet hush of the cool green wood.

"Do you remember those picnics at Peshawur, Dick—and the one we rode to that evening, just before—just before you—went away?"

"Do I remember! Would I could forget, Rose!"

"Oh, Dick, how long ago it is! Let us try to think that it is all back here now, and that we are once more boy and girl together. How young we were!" she went on musingly. 'Let me see—you were—how old were you, Dick? I was seventeen—and you?"

She began counting, tapping one finger after another on his arm. "Eighteen, nineteen, twenty—you were twenty-four. That is more than five years ago—five years, Dick! It seems like fifty!"

"Don't Rose! For God's sake, leave the past alone!"

He spoke almost roughly to her, as he snapped the twigs off a bough and crumpled them into bits between his fingers. "What makes you think of all that now?"

"Don't you remember we drank then to the next merry meeting? Mr. Mackenzie proposed the toast and you and I clinked glasses together when mamma was not looking. That was the first time John had condescended to join our frivolities. What a martyr he must have made of himself that evening, judging from the light in which he views picnics now. I thought mamma was so stupid to ask him. I didn't know—oh, Dick, if only I *had* known!"

"Rose, you must not." As he saw the blue eyes filling with slow tears. "You must not let yourself get morbid like this. It will be all right some day. And let us for to-day try to be happy, happy just in the present. That is good enough."

"Yes, yes," she said feverishly. "Only to-day! I did mean to be happy. No yesterday, no to-morrow, no—— Come, Dick, let us run down this steep bit of slope. It will be lovely,

and we shan't be able to stop ourselves. Come along! It will be thrilling."

She threw back her head at him with a ringing laugh, held out her hand, seized his in it, and before he could stop her, they were off, swiftly borne downwards by the strength of her impetuous movement.

A mad, bounding race over crackling twigs, brown bracken, and last summer's dead leaves; wild leaps over stumps of felled trees, breathless pushes through impeding branches. On, and on they went.

They could not stop now. They had started on their downward course and to the end they must now rush.

"Oh, Rose," he cried, "stop, stop! I am afraid. This is more than folly. Let me pull you up. You will hurt yourself."

"No, no!" she laughed back. "Keep on! don't stop now! We are nearly there."

One last burst and there before them lay the end, and a hard bit of roadway leading through the wood, and beyond——

Urquhart saw the danger of racing on across that road, for the ground beyond sank again precipitously, and was covered with a thick, matted undergrowth of brambles.

He swung his left arm round the trunk of a tree as they flew past it, and loosening his right hand free from Rose's tight clasp, flung it round her shoulders. With a sharp wrench that nearly

dislocated the arm from the socket they were pulled up short.

Dick let his arm fall to his side and his face paled. It had been a severe strain, and the pain shot with a burning throb up the limb. But that mattered little, and was scarcely felt in the relief at having arrested their heedless flight.

"I didn't think we should have done it! But it was stupid, Rose," he gasped.

"Didn't think we should have done what?" asked Rose, as she took off her hat and began to fan herself with it.

"Stopped in time. If we had dashed over the road we could never have pulled up at all before we had gone over the other side, and the Lord only knows what we might have got in for further on. It was a foolish thing to do, but it has turned out all right. Are you very tired and hot? I ought not to have let you start."

"Oh, it was lovely while it lasted, Dick. It was quite worth the risk."

She sat down on the bank by the side of the road and looked away through a break in the trees, whence the glistening river, like a gold and silver fleckled serpent, could be seen. Her cheeks were glowing vividly from the exercise, her ruffled hair lay in damp little curls on her forehead, and her eyes, as she brought them back from that distant view to his face, looked as if they had caught some of the unfathomable blue of the sky and imprisoned it there.

He threw himself down on the slope beside her, and gazed at her enthralled. She put out one small hot hand and laid it on the front sweep of his hair.

"Was it worth the risk, Rose, really? A mad race like that with me—to have ended, perhaps, in—in disaster?"

She pressed back his head with her hand and looked into his eyes.

"Yes," she whispered; "it was worth it. To be with you is worth—any afterwards."

He drew in his breath and held it for one fierce moment of desperate struggle—held it as he tried to hold every quivering, passion-stirred nerve in his body.

Then—"Kiss me, Rose, just once!" came back the answering whisper.

CHAPTER XXII.

THEY pulled down in the river through the lengthening lights and shadows of the waning afternoon, and had tea at a little inn on the bankside. They sat on the lawn afterwards, listening to a couple of strolling minstrels, who sang plaintive plantation songs to the accompaniment of a banjo and a tambourine. Rose insisted upon giving them tea, and she talked to the girl afterwards in a strange, excited fashion, while Gerry thrummed on the banjo, and chaffed the man.

But after the itinerant musicians had gone on to fresh audiences, she threw herself back in her chair and remained motionless for so long that at last Gerry asked her "What was up?" and "Did she want a nap?"

Dick had strolled off by himself during the minstrel entertainment, and could be seen in the distance stalking moodily along, smoking furiously, and kicking the stones at his feet.

He was inwardly cursing the weakness which had overtaken him after all his stern resolves,

and the tight hand he had been keeping on himself ever since he had been thrown into the temptation of Rose's presence again. And this was how much he was worth !

"This is a trifle dull !" said Gerry, after another vain endeavour to rouse his sister to liveliness. "Let's get back. You have had too much, you look as white as a boiled owl, and as limp as an unstarched collar. Home's the word for you, young woman. Come on, Cottie, and we'll see to the boats. Hi, there, Urquhart ! Coo-e-e ! And he sent a shout that might almost have been calculated to penetrate to the land which gave birth to such a call.

So through the soft glow of the exquisite eventide they dropped slowly on down the river. Cotherstone, who was rather celebrated in that line, sang them some delightful scraps of song, ranging from lightest comedy to saddest pathos. Gerry joined in choruses now and then, whenever there came the slightest opportunity, but the couple in the other boat constituted a remarkably quiet audience.

It followed, as a matter of course, that the two visitors went into the Bolton Street rooms for a sort of scratch meal to end the day. Gerry marshalled Urquhart in with Cotherstone in that conclusive manner that admits of no gainsaying, and, indeed, Urquhart thought it wiser to make no resistance.

It was the first time that he had sat at Rose's

table as guest, and he did not feel that he could flatter himself he had proved himself an acquisition.

"We might as well end up the day by doing something," said Gerry, as they pushed their chairs away from the table; "what do you say, Rose? We seem rather slow about being able to entertain ourselves; suppose we go and see if we can find someone else that can do it for us."

"No, thanks," she said, listlessly. "I have had enough for one day. But don't let me keep you others in."

She spoke to Gerry, but by a glance she included Urquhart in the general offer of release.

He did not accept Gerry's invitation, however, to join him and Cotherstone at a "look in somewhere." Rose went out on to the balcony to watch the two fellows go down the street, then she came back into the room, but stood leaning against the lintel of the open window.

"I must be going too," said Urquhart, feeling the danger of lingering.

"Are you in a great hurry?" she said. "You have never seen my boudoir and all my treasures. Come and tell me how you like the way I have arranged the room. Of course, it is nothing much, only a temporary decoration to impart a home-like air to the place. It amused Elise and me some wet days, and I flatter myself it does look rather effective."

She opened a door and led the way into a room giving out of the one they were in. She had made this apartment her own special sanctum, and her possessions were scattered about, as she had said, with a most effective grouping.

Urquhart wandered about examining her collection of treasures, while she sat out of the radius of the lamp and watched him going to and fro.

One corner of the room she had, with the assistance of some handsome draperies and supports, deftly turned into a veritable cosy corner, forming a sort of alcove cut off from the rest of the room. A small coloured Oriental lamp hung suspended from the ceiling, and cast a soft glow round.

As Urquhart passed in through the curtains and caught the faint, subdued light, memory stirred painfully, though at first confusedly.

He had done this same thing once before. He had stood in a dim, quiet light, with falling curtains closing behind him and before him—— A sensation of being smothered in this confined space came over him. He moved to free himself from it, when something gleaming on the wall caught his eye. A sword, drawn from its scabbard, hung there, fastened up by some Indian wrought metal chains.

It was his! He knew it at once. His sword, forfeited five years ago, and hanging now as a useless appendage in a woman's boudoir.

Rose, sitting in the quiet stillness of the outer room, heard him utter a sharp ejaculation.

"That here!"

She came quickly to his side. She noted instantly the change in his face, the white, hard look coming over it she had seen there once or twice before, and that never failed to give her a *serrement de cœur*.

"What is it, Dick?"

"How did that come here?"

He turned on her and his eyes gleamed like the steel of the blade.

"I—I bought it in. At least Mr. Mackenzie did it for me. I wanted it so badly. Oh, Dick, don't look at me like that! No one wanted it so much as I did. I have taken such care of it. No one has ever touched it but me. It has gone with me everywhere."

He did not appear to be listening to a word she was saying. That some great emotion was working in him she could see, and she felt afraid of him. There came a suggestion of white heat on his face, and he did not seem master of his movements as he took a step forward, put out his hand, and wrenched the weapon loose from its fastenings.

The next moment she heard a sharp crunch, and the sword broke across his knee. He flung the pieces with a clatter to the floor, and they fell between them. There was blood on one piece where his bared hand had gripped it.

He gave a short, bitter laugh.

"Baptized at last!" he said, as if to himself. "Baptized and broken together! Sword and owner done for! My God!"

"Dick!"

Rose drew nearer. The hem of her white gown swept over the pieces of broken steel. She laid her hand on his arm. He had not heard her speak his name, and he started fearfully at her touch, and seemed to shrink from her. There was a dreadful look on his face. She had never seen anything like it before, and she trembled now as she noticed it.

"Dick," she said again softly, "look at your hand!"

At her words he looked down dully. The blood was flowing from the palm of his left hand. He carelessly shook the drops off, still unconscious of what he was doing. One of them fell with a splash upon her gown and stained its whiteness with a dark, ugly spot. But they neither of them heeded that. Mechanically he pulled out his handkerchief and wrapped it quickly round the wounded hand.

His eyes had not lost that expression of horror as he pushed out through the curtains and made towards the door of the drawing-room.

"What are you going to do, Dick?" she asked as she followed him on his way. "You are not going like this? What have I done?"

"Go back, Rose. Do not touch me ! I must go. It is not what *you* have done, it is what *I* have been doing all this time."

How he got out of the house and into the street below he did not know. He was only conscious that there was fire in his brain again, and that he could not bear it.

The soft night air blew coolly and refreshingly about him. He went on aimlessly until he came to the Park, where he turned in and sat on one of the deserted seats in the quiet loneliness of the place.

He could think nothing, see nothing, only that broken, blood-stained sword. Time passed on without heed. Faintly across the Green Park boomed the chimes from Westminster. A policeman sauntered by, looked inquisitively at him ; but evidently being satisfied by the investigation, continued his beat, and left him in undisturbed possession of his solitude.

The more prolonged solemn midnight chimes roused him at last. He stood up and felt stiff and chilled. The dew was falling heavily, the seat wet, his coat damp, and himself miserably depressed. The reaction had set in.

He went back along Piccadilly towards his chambers. As he turned down St. James's Street, a man came leisurely towards him, smoking. The fragrant odour of his cigar was wafted on ahead. They passed each other at the open door of one of the clubs, and the light,

as it streamed out, shone on Urquhart's pallid, drawn face.

The man turned his head sharply, stared at Urquhart, walked on a pace or two, hesitated, and came back on his steps.

"Urquhart!" he said, coming up to Dick, "It is you, isn't it?"

Lanyon's kindly face looked at him.

Urquhart stared at him for a space bewilderedly, then he recognised him.

"You don't seem to be picking up much, Urquhart," observed Lanyon, scanning him more nearly as he joined him in his walk down the street.

"No, I'm not, I'm running down express speed," he answered, with a suppressed bitterness that gave the words a meaning Lanyon did not grasp. "It's this dashed fever I can't shake off."

He paused. They had reached the door of his chambers. He did not propose to Lanyon to go in with him, he merely waited in an apathetic sort of way that would have been decidedly suggestive of his wishes if Lanyon had chosen to construe it, as Urquhart meant him to do.

But Lanyon did not choose to take the wordless hint. He hesitated. He did not like the look of Urquhart at all; he could see that he ought not to be left alone in his present condition, yet how could he force himself when not

the merest hint at a welcome had been extended to him. He took the initiative.

"Are you tired, Urquhart, or do you care to come down to the club for a smoke and a yarn? There are two or three rather jolly fellows still there I'd like to introduce you to."

"Not to-night, thanks, Lanyon. I'm not in the mood. They would not think much of your introduction."

He spoke huskily, and his foot was uncertain as he put it on the step while he fumbled for his latch-key.

"Look here, Urquhart," persisted Lanyon, determined to stand the risk of a snub, or a slice of cold shoulder, in his endeavour to do his little best for a fellow who was so clearly down in the depths, "I don't like your looks, so there's the plain, uncomplimentary truth. Are you here alone, or is someone with you?"

"I am alone, but there is really nothing the matter, thanks. I feel a bit bowled over to-night, but that will pass."

"Oh well, if you feel yourself, that's all right, and in that case I'd like to come in and have a pipe with you," said Lanyon with a persistence he did not often work himself up into evincing. Urquhart frowned, but managed to mutter some incoherent words about "awfully good!" and so on, as he opened the door, and led the way upstairs to the second floor.

He moved about listlessly, setting out cigars, tobacco, tumblers, and spirits on the table, then he threw himself into a chair with no attempt to disguise his intense weariness.

Lanyon chatted lightly on all the while, but keeping his eyes, nevertheless, watchfully on his host.

"What have you been doing to your hand, Urquhart?" he asked presently. "There's blood on it."

Urquhart looked at it and the colour suddenly flamed painfully into his face.

"It is nothing. A flesh wound merely. I cut it with a—with a knife." And he put his handkerchief again round the palm.

"Awkward place for a cut!" remarked Lanyon, inwardly marvelling what the fellow could have been doing to cut his hand like that, for the knife surely must have been double-edged.

Lanyon had not meant to express his suspicious thought aloud, but Urquhart caught the words and flashed a sudden look at him. He put his hand on the spirit bottle, poured out some of the fiery liquid into his tumbler, and tossed it off. Then he looked at Lanyon again straight in the eyes.

"I told a lie, Lanyon," he said, with dogged straight-forwardness. "It wasn't a knife. I cut my hand with a sword. It was my sword. It is five years since I held it in my hand. This evening I came across it, and—I broke it."

He flung his arms on the table and buried his face in them, and Lanyon saw his shoulders heave.

An hour later Urquhart was in bed, tossing restlessly from side to side, and pouring forth a confused, ceaseless babble of half incomprehensible jargon. Lanyon sat beside him all through the night, patiently administering cooling drinks, and doing everything with a gentle clumsiness that was touching.

"Poor old chap! If only he would make a clean breast of it and tell a fellow what the deuce it all is."

Urquhart became sensible towards the morning, but was too weak to stir hand or foot. Lanyon suggested sending a message to Miss Urquhart, but Dick would not hear of it.

"Oh, no, don't bother them. My sister is very much occupied down there. I'd rather they did not know. Tell the doctor to get me a nurse, please. And, Lanyon, you are awfully good, but don't you stay here. I can manage till the nurse comes. It's not fair on you to keep you bottled up with a cranky chap this lovely weather."

"All right," said Lanyon cheerfully, "we'll see about that. I don't mean either of us to be bottled up for long."

But Urquhart had a relapse before the day had worn through, and after that Lanyon had rather an exciting time of it; but he managed it by himself, and sent for neither nurse nor any

outside help beyond the doctor's. He became extremely interested in the queer couple he had come across, and would drop in at all hours to see what Lanyon was doing, and to have a chat with him to relieve the tedium of the quiet hours of unconsciousness. When Urquhart had the fever strong on him, Lanyon found his hands pretty full, and it was often all he could do to keep his patient within bounds.

A week had gone by before Urquhart roused himself one morning to say feebly :

"Have there been any letters, Lanyon? Is there anything from the Foreign Office?"

"Well, no, not exactly," said Lanyon, with hesitating ruefulness, "but there are several other letters." And he took them up from the chimney-piece and brought them over to Urquhart. "I wrote to your father and told him you had been a bit seedy, but nothing of any consequence. That's what you wished, wasn't it?"

"Thanks, you are awfully good, Lanyon," and Urquhart looked at him with gratitude in his hollow eyes.

Then he idly turned over the letters. There were two from Mrs. Elliott. He flushed at sight of them, but laid them down without breaking the seals.

Lanyon saw the action, and decided to make an excuse to leave him to the unembarrassed perusal of the missives.

"Mrs. Elliott has called about you several times," he volunteered, as he walked about making his preparations to go out. "She brought a lot of flowers and fruit. All that lot came from her," pointing to a profusion of lovely flowers inartistically grouped in a big bowl, and bearing the stamp of masculine arrangement, and to a piled-up dish of delicious fruit. "She wanted to see you, Urquhart. I told her you couldn't see anyone, doctor's orders."

Lanyon arranged his tie before the looking-glass over the chimney-piece, and it seemed to be specially obstinate this morning; then he went into the adjoining room, and sought courage for the task before him in the wash-bowl, as the mirror had refused to inspire him with the necessary amount for the unpleasant duty he had set himself to do. He washed his hands with a good deal of noisy splash, and came back drying them vigorously. He looked remarkably ill at ease, and his looks spoke his feelings. Then he sat down on the edge of Urquhart's couch.

"I say, Urquhart," he began nervously, rubbing away with the towel, "there is something I want awfully to say to you. May I?"

"Go on," said Dick quietly, but looking disturbed all the same.

"You know you've been off your head a goodish bit of the time you were ill. I tried not to listen to you, nor to put two and two

together, but I couldn't help hearing. I don't want to conclude anything, or—or——" He paused. "I say, Urquhart," he blurted out, in a desperate rush to get to the root of the matter, "couldn't you come back with me to Aldershot for a spell? I'd be awfully glad to have you, and I'm certain it would do you no end of good. Aldershot's a capital place, if you only take it the right way. Of course, it's the Desert of Sahara, or Siberia, according as to how the wind sets in, but there are going to be some excellent manœuvres, and, anyway, it's better than loafing about town with nothing to do. It plays the Lord Harry and all with a fellow, having nothing to do. Say you'll come, Urquhart."

But Dick hesitated. Rose flashed across his mind.

Lanyon, perhaps, read his thoughts. At any rate he volunteered a piece of information which supplied answer to them.

"Old Moneybags—Elliott, you know—has popped up again. Saw him in her carriage yesterday. Well, what do you say, Urquhart? Will you come to Aldershot?" persisted Lanyon, mentally determining to book him before anyone else got at him.

He knew perfectly well the reason of Urquhart's wavering; he had not forgotten those two unopened letters, nor Urquhart's face as he had taken them, and he stood there waiting

in a stolid, dogged manner, that demanded an answer one way or the other.

"I'll think about it," began Urquhart, feebly.

"Oh, no, I know better than that!" was Lanyon's quick answer. "I promise not to overwork you with sight-seeing. You shall be quite a free agent, but it will do you good. Rouse yourself, man, and give me an acceptance."

"Very well. Lanyon, thank you, yes, I'll go," and Urquhart leaned back with a weary sigh.

"That's right."

Lanyon had won his end and need wait no longer. Urquhart should be left in peace to read those dashed letters at his ease.

"Can't think why I care a hang one way or the other about the fellow! But I'd like to cheer him up somehow or other."

He mused thus to himself as he went off to make sundry preparations for the journey, which he resolutely intended should be taken that very evening. It might shake Urquhart a bit, and bring on a relapse, but that risk was better than the probabilities that might happen if he hung on in London in his present enfeebled, reckless condition of mind.

As Lanyon came up the street on his return from his business commissions, he saw the Elliotts' carriage drawing up, Mrs. Elliott herself in it.

He hurried forward, congratulating himself

upon being able to take the field at the right moment.

"Oh, yes, he's on the mend, Mrs. Elliott," he began assuring her in his cheerful way, "but weak as a rat. He wants shaking up. I wish the Government would find him something to do. They are pretty blind to their own interests, but that is their normal condition, or they would soon be making use of such valuable services as Urquhart could give them. It's this enforced idleness that is at the root of Urquhart's illness."

"He has not used the carriage yet," said Rose; "I hope he did not mind my offering it."

"Of course not. It was like your thoughtful kindness. But he hasn't been out yet, except one or two little strolls in the cool of the evening. But if you really meant your offer, and I am quite sure you did, it would be awfully kind of you to let him have the carriage this afternoon. Could you spare it?"

"Oh, yes, certainly," and Rose's face brightened. "What time?"

"Well," said Lanyon, with an air of deep consideration, as if the idea had but just occurred to him, whereas he knew the exact moment when he should require it, "if it could be here by about half-past five this afternoon?"

"Of course," said Rose, "it shall be here. And—and will he drive in the Park, do you think? I should like to see him."

"Ah, well, Mrs. Elliott, as to that," said Lanyon, "he is very weak and just horribly low-spirited. I don't think I'd see him just yet. Suppose you wait until he comes back?"

"Comes back!" echoed Rose, turning quickly to him.

"Yes, he's coming down with me to Aldershot this afternoon for a few days," explained Lanyon, trying to speak unconcernedly, and all the time feeling horribly mean as he said the words. It was as if he had stolen a march on the little woman, which he certainly had done.

Rose looked him straight in the face, bravely hiding what this news was to her.

"I see," she said, slowly, and somehow Lanyon had to turn away from the eyes that had never left his face. "I hope it will do him good. Please tell him I said so, Captain Lanyon. He shall have the carriage. And now good-bye, I will not keep you standing out here in this hot sunshine any longer. Make my adieux to Mr. Urquhart."

"Beastly mean I felt, too!" muttered Lanyon, as he mounted the staircase. "But it had to be done! Now to pack up Urquhart and take him off. Thank the Lord, I never went in for the folly of love and such like botherations!"

Lanyon proved as strong as his resolves.

He literally packed Urquhart up and bore him off to Aldershot. Then he set to work to rouse him. That was a Herculean task. True, now

and then Urquhart wakened to a faint show of interest as he sat his horse and looked on at the mimic war with which Aldershot was being convulsed, but it all seemed so feeble and tame to him after those experiences among the Afghan mountains, that the spark of enthusiasm was a very spurious one, and soon died out. The languor consequent on his illness began to develop into pure apathy. He cared for nothing, and yet had not the strength to say so, and he dragged about trying politely to enter into Lanyon's interests in a way that was infinitely pathetic. Lanyon was in despair.

Urquhart had been strolling about the town one morning in an unoccupied manner while Lanyon was on a court-martial. As he passed the door of "Tommy White's" a lady in deep mourning emerged and crossed the pavement in front of him. Urquhart had not recognised her at the moment; now, as the sun lighted up her face, he saw who it was. The widow's veil and sombre garb had proved a momentary disguise, but he knew the face at once when he saw it more clearly.

Did she remember him? The smile that came to the sad mouth answered that doubt.

"I am so glad to meet you," she said. "I have often thought of you and spoken of you, but you did not write. And now you don't look well." Happy, she would have said, had she expressed her real thought.

Urquhart walked with her through the town, and he parted from her with a promise to go and see her the following day.

Lanyon accompanied him the next afternoon, and insisted upon Urquhart's acceptance of Mrs. Stanley's invitation to spend some days with her at Farnborough to be nursed and fussed over.

"I am quite sure he has already been well looked after, Captain Lanyon," she said, sweetly, fearing that her suggestion might throw reflection on Lanyon's nursing; "but, you know, women love fussing and coddling an invalid, and I have not much to do now."

And so it all came about quite in the ordinary course of every-day events.

There was no outward sign to show that at last Urquhart's path was about to be made straight before him. The saving hand he had long sought was stretched out, and in all unconsciousness he grasped it as he stepped over the threshold of Mrs. Stanley's little cottage at Farnborough.

The half-sisterly, half-maternal manner she adopted towards him won the confidence no one had yet been able to tempt from him. Little by little, as they sat together in the quiet evenings, he began to tell her of his past, until, one Sunday, when they had been together to see the tablet she had had put up in the tiny church in the Park, to one of the most loyal hearts that

ever beat, the wall of reserve he had built about himself was broken down.

Urquhart poured out to her the whole sad story of his life. Nothing was held back. He knew that if she did condemn, she also would understand and forgive.

Oh! the relief to the strained heart and conscience to share that dark, unhappy secret, and to feel the touch of loving sympathy and hope when she laid her hand on his and told him the one and only thing there could be for him to do.

He saw it all clearly now; hitherto he had, as it were, looked at himself "through a glass darkly"; now the scales fell from his eyes, and he knew that the life here failed of all because his heart was elsewhere. His honour, his very life, were among those Afghan fastnesses, held firmly there by the passionate, unalterable love of a woman, and there must he seek them.

There was but one way to do it. He must get that appointment about which he had let his ardour cool so miserably.

Once more he went up to London to prove a very thorn in the flesh to the easy-going dawdlers at the Foreign Office. And this time his earnestness was kept at fever heat; they saw that, and began to bestir themselves.

For lack of something to do, he sauntered, one hot afternoon, into Burlington House, scarcely knowing whither he went, and caring

less. He noticed a lot of carriages in the courtyard, and several people who were going his way all turned in there, so he followed in their wake. He had much artistic taste and love of Nature in all her phases, but the stuffy galleries and the jostling, chattering crowd gave him small opportunity of enjoyment. He stood in one of the less frequented rooms, just deciding that it was a "rotten show," and he would "cut it," when his eyes fell on a small oil-painting. He had the corner almost to himself, and there he stood and drank in the beauty of the perfect face. It was a picture of an Eastern maiden leaning with folded arms over a balcony, looking out almost wistfully at the great unknown world before her. Heavy gold bands clasped the smooth flesh of her arms, a rich, many-coloured drapery fell from the bare shoulders, and the thick masses of dusky curls were bound with barbaric ornaments of gold and drooping sequins. The pathos of the huge luminous eyes, and the childish curve of the beautiful mouth, made a sudden lump come into his throat. Something tugged at his heart-strings, a wave of memory broke over him, sweeping him on its crest back into the past. He was an Afghan once more, his leathern poshteen was about him, and he was slowly riding up the steep hillside to the citadel of Khelat. There, on the tower top, was the little waiting figure of Zorayda, his wife—yes, his

wife, whom he had forsaken, left to die of a broken heart. He turned madly away, feeling as if he must rush off then and there to implore, demand, *force* some appointment from those men at the Office; anything to get back to her, to tell her all, and see the glad smiles of forgiveness and welcome replace the sadness he knew was on the beloved little face.

And instead—he turned to face Mrs. Elliott standing behind him. She was watching him with a curious intent look, and the expression which he had seen once before was marring again the perfect mouth. He felt again that same unsteady feeling about her he had had then. But as he caught it, it flickered away, and the lips were wreathed in sweetest smiles. She extended her hand, and by the action appropriated him to herself.

They left the Academy together, and she took him back with her to her rooms in the hotel in Bolton Street for tea. All through the meal, and afterwards, during the drive in the Park which she won him to take with her, she felt the change in him, but she said nothing.

“You must come back and dine with us,” she said, as the carriage turned out of the Corner and went on down Piccadilly. “Now don’t make excuses, it will be better than your club. Time was——”

“No,” he corrected gently; “time *is*, Mrs. Elliott. I do not think I can come this evening.

I have an appointment at my club I cannot break, and several letters to get off."

"Well, then, let us see if we cannot effect a compromise, for an absolute refusal I decline to take. We are going to the 'Lyceum' afterwards. John will be there in body, but absent in spirit. As he goes to sleep as soon as he gets into his seat, we always have a box for that reason—won't you come and take pity on me there? Oh, do, Dick, it is so lonely! See, here we are at the door—change your mind, and come in now!"

No, he would not go in. There was too much of the alluring spider and giddy fly business in the arrangement. But he gave in to the theatre proposition. He would have despised himself utterly for this weakness, only he knew now it was all different. It was merely to please her; he thought he ought at least to show her what kindness he could. Was not he planning to put a barrier of separation between them for evermore? Ah—but would she understand that? How was she to read the sudden change of tactics? We are apt to forget those "others" when we are settling matters smoothly for ourselves.

Rose had never been so sweet in all her life as she was that night at the theatre, beautiful beyond description in her velvet and jewels, but more beautiful still in this soft pathetic mood. He could not help feeling the charm of her

presence ; it had always had a strong magnetic influence over him. Even the flutter of her fan stirred him faintly now. Once her mere touch had thrilled him for hours. But that was gone for ever ; he was armed now in the breast-plate of honour towards another woman, and beyond the surface-prick her ablest dart failed to touch him.

She knew it—she read him like an open book. From the moment she had caught the rapt look on his face as he had gazed at that picture in the Academy, she knew she had lost him. All was clear to her—his struggles to escape her thralldom, his mad bursts of reckless despair, which he had never been able to hide from her, her powerlessness to captivate him wholly, her many letters imploring him to come and see her which had remained unanswered, the thousand and one indefinable evidences that even in his most abandoned moments he had never been wholly hers again—all these were solved. Oh, the bitterness of the awakening from the delirium in which she had allowed herself to live, to this cruel, undeniable reality !

There was a rival. Another woman had stepped between them. She watched him again now, and saw that new softened look in his eyes, that alert expectancy about his whole face and bearing. His body was there beside her, she could touch him if she cared to stretch out one hand ; but his thoughts, his soul ! Could she

touch those? Where were they? She addressed some trivial remark to him and got no reply. *He had not heard her!* When had such a thing happened before? How he used to hang upon her slightest word! Now!—— She turned sick and faint, and her hands clutched the fan so tightly that the slender sticks snapped.

"After all," she said, with a bitter little laugh as the sound of the breaking tortoise-shell awoke him from dreamland, "I don't know that you are much of an improvement on John! He sleeps asleep, you sleep awake."

"Oh, I beg your pardon!" he said, puzzled at the inflection of her voice. "Had you spoken to me? It was horribly remiss of me. And you—you are not well?" he cried, looking at the marred face more closely. "What is it?"

"Oh, nothing! It is hot, the play is stupid, most plays are, and my companions not entertaining. Women are unfortunate: they are so much more sleepless than men. It must be nice to feel drowsy the moment one fits into an easy chair or gets a dull companion."

"Ah, you have been bored. Then, by all means, let us go. I have had enough," and he rose.

"You! Oh, *your* play to-night has been of your own creation! Was it very enchanting? May one know any of the *dramatis personæ*?" She, too, left her chair as she spoke, and turned sharply to her husband. He was enjoying his

nap in his usual hearty way—had not he eaten a good dinner, and was not he, therefore, entitled, as a Briton, to an after-dinner snooze, wherever he might be? “John,” she said, shaking him with a vicious pleasure, glad to vent a little of her misery in some practical way on someone, “will you finish your nap here and be turned out with the lights, or perhaps carefully tucked up in the dust sheets, or are you coming home with me?”

He awoke with a snort. His puffy guinea-yellow visage looked uglier than ever with the blur of sleep over it. His wife turned from it to the dark, comely one beside her, and her heart sickened again. It might once have been hers—she had meant still to make it hers—but! She stumbled a little as they went down the rose-lighted staircase, and muttered something about her gown being too long in front. Urquhart offered her his arm; she laid her fingers on it, but the next moment dropped them with a slight shiver. He watched the husband and wife settle themselves in the carriage, then he shut the door and stood back on the pavement. History repeats itself—to both of them at the same moment came a flash out of their past. He had once before done much the same thing, closed the carriage door between them and watched her drive away out of his life. She suddenly leaned forward, and he saw the flash of a bared white hand, just as he had seen it that night in the long ago. Then it had been bare, as now,

but ringless, a girl's free, unclaimed hand. Now it flashed with jewels and wore the badge of appropriation. He had not touched it then ; he did not touch it now. His own was just going up to his hat, Mr. Elliott's face pushed itself forward from the other side of his wife, and her half-extended hand fell back out of sight again.

"Come and have some supper," he said, with a half-smothered yawn.

"No, thanks, not to-night. I will go to my rooms and see if there are any letters for me ; I am expecting one. Good-bye!" And the horse moved down the descent of Wellington Street.

"Rose, my love," began Mr. Elliott, "I think that young man——

"Oh, don't talk to me!" she burst in angrily. "I am tired—I—oh, John, for Heaven's sake, put the window down! Do you want to stifle us?"

"The night air is chilly, my dear, and——"

"Then pray let us have some of it! I am stifled."

He lowered the sash obediently, and wrapped his silk scarf more closely about his throat and turned up his coat collar. They drove on in silence, broken at last by Mr. Elliott.

"My dear, are you wise? I distinctly felt you shiver."

"Well, and if I did? Mayn't I shiver if I like?"

"Only, my love, the draught——" he began gently.

"Oh, shut the window ; do as you like, roast us to cinders, only for goodness' sake, leave me alone."

She flung off her cloak as they entered their sitting-room and let it fall in a heap on the floor. Mr. Elliott, coming in just behind, made a helpless flounder among the folds, and nearly came a "cropper." She burst into a wild little laugh at his discomfiture, a laugh that seemed to take a strange end, more like a sob than a sound of mirth. Her husband's eyes roamed over the table and lighted up a little as they fell on an appetising-looking lobster mayonnaise. He did not notice his wife's appearance, nor the tragedy in her face.

"I don't want any supper, John, nor to be disturbed."

"Oh, Rose, surely you haven't seen! You had better stay and have a little supper. This looks like a capital mayonnaise." And he bent with loving appreciation over the tempting delicacy.

He spoke to the empty air. She was already across the landing, and he heard her dismissing her maid and calling Nipper. Then the door of her room shut, and the lock shot with a sharp click.

"Dear, dear, her head must be very bad!" sighed her husband, as he sat down to his solitary meal, prepared to enjoy himself thoroughly now that his wife was not there to rein him up.

Mrs. Elliott crossed her room with swift

sweeping strides and stood before her long mirror, gazing at herself intently, much as one stares hard at a picture to take in small details. The reflection she saw was one which ought to have pleased any woman, but there was no satisfaction on the living face, only bitter, wild despair.

"Oh, yes, you are lovely," she cried to the mirrored face, "and, for all it avails, you might as well be as ugly as sin. You could not hold a man when you had won him! Bah! I hate you!"

She dragged the flashing necklet from her throat, the arrows from her hair, and flung them on the table, her face flushing and paling alternately, and her mouth working. Then she sank on the floor by the couch and buried her face in the cushions.

"I have lost him! I have lost him! My God, how shall I live! What shall I do?" she moaned. "Oh, it cannot be!" With a flicker of hope she raised her head. "He cannot have gone from me when he loved me so! Whom could he have seen in that outlandish place? Some black creature that he has got entangled with, and yet——" She paused, her breath coming in quick sobs, as some new thought struck her. She sprang up and went again to the glass. Her face now was blurred with the tears she had been shedding, and disfigured by the passion raging like a tempest within her.

"That face in the Academy to-day! Why did he stand there staring at it with his very soul in his eyes? She — was — beautiful — beautiful! Could it be possible? Ah!—— Oh, Dick, my love, my love, what shall I do?"

She staggered back to the couch, and the first grey streaks of dawn were penetrating the room before her swollen eyelids dropped over her aching eyeballs and brought her a brief merciful oblivion, but little comforting rest. She had sent her maid off in her frantic hurry to be alone, and after she had done so she had discovered that she could not free herself from her gown. The bodice laced firmly up the back, and, try as she would, the strong laces refused to give way. So she lay on her bed in all her confining finery, and awoke to the new morning with throbbing head and stiff, unrelaxed limbs to drag through a weary day of despair.

CHAPTER XXIII.

URQUHART walked slowly along the Strand, across Waterloo Place, through Pall Mall, and so on to his rooms in St. James's. He looked in at the brilliantly lighted windows of the numberless clubs as he passed them, and he heard the hum of voices, and caught the fragrance of their smoke, but he felt no desire to join them. Rose had faded from his mind, he was far away among the silent Afghan passes. He turned up the lights in his room and glanced round. There on the centre table, evidently sent by hand, lay an envelope, bearing the words—"On Her Majesty's Service."

A quick throb went through him as he broke the big official seal. The note was short, requesting his presence at the Foreign Office at eleven o'clock the next morning. He read it, put it down, took it up, read it again, and scrutinised the crooked signature, felt afraid to hope or speculate. Then he lit his pipe and ran down the stairs again and out into the cold darkness of the street. There, while Rose lay

battling in her bedroom in her broken-hearted despair, he paced up and down, first one side and then the other, feeling like a prisoner waiting for a reprieve which cannot reach him, even if it come at all, before "eleven o'clock next morning."

This time the reprieve did come. For once in a way, qualifications were considered, backed as they were by strong influence, for his father, late Colonel in the old John Company service, had many friends made during his long Indian career, and Urquhart was offered an appointment to the political mission going to Cabul with the intention of counteracting the Russian intrigues which had made headway during the period of wavering policy inseparable from Parliamentary government.

Cabul! That meant proximity to Khelat—to Zorayda! His head buzzed, and only indistinctly he heard some question about how soon he could be ready to start.

"Now!" he said, rising as he spoke, as if Cabul were one of the stations on the Underground Railway, and he had but to shoot down a dingy flight of stairs and be on his way.

"Now?" The word was echoed in mild surprise by the official one, who could not even comprehend the meaning of the short Saxon "now." "There are many matters yet to talk over and settle. Meanwhile, you have an outfit to get."

Urquhart nearly smiled as he thought of the size of the wardrobe which had sufficed these last five years. He left the Office eventually with the understanding that he was ready to start when they were ready to send him.

He trod on air as he hurried along, deciding to make some necessary purchases at once, and to take the news down to his father by an evening train, instead of sending it by letter. He was passing Burlington House a little later on, and as he saw the building his steps slackened of themselves, and, in response to his unspoken thought, turned into the courtyard.

"Just one look!" he muttered in an excusing way as he sprang up the staircase. "It won't take a minute."

As a matter of fact, it took exactly three-quarters of an hour, and when he passed out into the street again, the road was thronged with the carriages of womenfolk on shopping expeditions. A block had occurred just ahead; opposite the Academy a smart Victoria was drawn up, waiting. The occupant chanced to turn her head as Urquhart came into view under the arch. Her eyes saw him at once—she would have seen him in a crowd packed as tightly as sardines in a tin, and the fat wheezing Nipper, lying on the mat at her feet with out-lolling tongue, got a sudden kick from a buckled shoe which made him sit up with a snap of his jaws. His bark of recognition caught Urqu-

hart's ears, and he pushed forward to the carriage side.

Rose came into his calculations for the first time. *She* would have to be told. It occurred to him that it might not be pleasant hearing for her, distinctly the reverse, probably there might be a "scene." To avoid this he cowardly decided to break his news to her at once, here in the public thoroughfare, in an off-hand manner, as if it were a sort of every-day occurrence that a man threw up the sponge of social life, broke through the ring of watchers, and departed ere the rounds were over. For once he blessed the proprieties which must be powerful enough at any rate to prevent anything violent in Piccadilly, and so help him to escape a *mauvais quart d'heure*. When we break our own hearts, we feel the earth ought to stand still and darkness spread over the face of it, in awe at such suffering; when the catastrophe takes place in another's existence, we marvel that such a fuss could be made over the cracking of so questionable a possession.

Urquhart's calculations were correct; Mrs. Elliott made no outward sign as they drove along to show that she was being smothered in the tumbling ruins of her castle in the air. She had looked white and jaded before, the few lines added now about her silent mouth, and the extra tinge of pallor were unnoticed by him. His eyes were still too full of the glamour of that other face to notice this one, and the woman

at his side waited vainly for one word of tenderness to soften the blow.

"How soon will you go?" she asked.

"That rests with the Office. I shall be ready any day."

"You are — glad — to go?" The words came out with difficulty. Even his absorption was penetrated and he looked at her. She saw the glance and her face flushed as she turned it from him. She knew the traces of last night were written there in no beautifying lines, and she shrank pathetically from his inspection.

"I have neuralgia this morning," she said quickly, and she lowered her parasol till its lace edge screened her face almost from view; "I did not sleep well. It is strange how one feels the heat in England which one would not notice in India. You will soon be frizzling again, or is it not so hot in—what is the name of the place? I forget, and geography was never my strong point even in my school days." The words were rattled out anyhow. As soon as she had asked that first question she knew she had not strength to hear the answer which would follow—that she had read in his face the moment she had seen him—so she kept on with her string of heedless chatter until the door in Bolton Street was reached, never giving him the opportunity to reply to anything she said.

She did not ask him to go in with her, but held out her hand on the low step. He had some-

thing more to say, however, and took no notice of the sign of dismissal, but followed her up the small staircase to her room. The moment he was seated, Nipper took up his position on the edge of his patent leather shoe. He had a queer characteristic of always choosing the edge of something belonging to a human to sit on, and with stupid doggy fidelity he now preferred the uncomfortable hardness of Urquhart's leather to his mistress' soft silk flounces. Mrs. Elliott dropped wearily into a low chair, but changed it for another instantly on discovering that the light from the window was falling full on her face.

Several times had Urquhart made attempts to pay her back the debt he owed her, but she had always refused to acknowledge that there was any such thing between them, and had even laughingly torn up two of his cheques before him. He meant to have the matter settled now in all seriousness, and he told her so.

"Women are so unreasonable where money is concerned," he said irritably to himself; "surely she must understand the uncomfortable hole in which she puts me!"

"May I not have the memory that I once had one moment's happiness from this money I ruined my life to possess? You are going away—we shall most probably not—not meet again——" She rose and walked to a little table, fidgeted with some flowers in a bowl, came back, and sat on another chair still further from the light and his eyes.

"Oh, but Mrs. Elliott—Rose," he corrected, as he saw the twitch about her mouth.

She was very restless this morning. She left her seat again, and coming over to him laid her hand for a moment on his shoulder.

"Please, Dick," she said simply. "Indeed you must grant me this. If you like I will instead——"

"Yes?" he questioned eagerly as she stopped. "What may I do instead? Have you thought of some pleasanter way of putting me out of your debt?"

"Is it so very hard and troublesome to you to owe one small thing to *me*?" Her hand dropped to her side, and she reeled a little unsteadily, shutting her eyes tightly and putting her hand across them. "I am sorry to appear inhospitable, but I must ask you to go now, please. Don't wait—go. My neuralgia is returning."

He got up, looking very uncomfortable, and feeling horribly big and strong beside the small pain-racked figure.

"It is dreadful! I don't like to see you suffer so! Can you do nothing to get relief? I wish I could think of some remedy. Have you tried——"

She raised her head and looked straight into his eyes, the shadow of such torture in hers that the hypocritical sentence was left unfinished.

"I may call and see you when I get back to town?"

"You ask *permission* to come and see me?"

She gave a little laugh. "You must come for Nipper. England does not agree with him, or else his mistress does not understand him. Master and dog are difficult to understand, so take him away when—when—— Oh, good-bye! I will write to you of what I was thinking just now."

He left the room, seeing that she could bear his presence no longer, and no mention was made of their next meeting.

Two days later Urquhart received a short note, telling him that she would like a little parting gift, some small souvenir to settle that "affair" between them. "Nothing costly, please, I am sick of valuables, merely a little trinket that I may keep and wear now and then. Above all, not a *ring*. I once hoped——" The letter was not ended.

He haunted jewellers' shops for the best part of one day, and at last unearthed a curious Indian snake with an opal in its head and two emeralds for eyes. It could be worn twisted about the throat or curved doubly round the wrist, and struck him as just the thing. He took it to his rooms and packed it himself, feeling softened and sentimental. That fatal weakness in his character, the utter inability to display needful strength where a woman was concerned, assailed him again. He must see her once more, must try to soothe the lines of pain from the beautiful mouth, and kiss away the sadness from the poor sweet eyes.

CHAPTER XXIV.

URQUHART's last night in England had come. There had been almost a rush at the end, as there generally is, so much more to do than was counted on, so many more interviews to go through, tedious explanations to hear and instructions to receive, that he had after all very little spare time. His father and sister came to London, too, to see the last of him, and were staying at Morley's. His gunner brother had run up from Portsmouth for a few hours, but duty had recalled him. At the beginning of the week his youngest sister had come up from Berkshire, and of course had brought her boy with her, for "Uncle Dick" to do a little final baby-worship. The touch of the sturdy little fingers had aroused sad memories of another wee hand that had once clung to his. Would he ever be able to gather up those broken threads and so join them, that the weaving of his life's pattern might not be irretrievably spoilt?

He had returned to his rooms now after dining with his father and sister, to see to the strapping

up of his baggage, the settling of bills, arranging of papers, etc. Presently he would go back to "Morley's," and St. James' Street would know him no more. The house was very quiet, the lower apartments were unoccupied, and there was no one but a man in charge in the basement.

The last task was finished, all was ready. He had practically done with England. He looked round the littered room, and the old feeling of indifference began to steal over him. What a rush we make of life, and yet, after all, how little consequence all our bustle is! Here to-day, gone to-morrow, scarcely missed. How lightly we touch even the border of another's interests! His brother had managed to fit a visit to his tailor into his few hours' leave-time, and had been as anxious about the cut of his coat as if Persia were an undiscovered country; one sister had been mildly absorbed part of the time in a series of church meetings, and the other had opportunely combined shopping and farewells, looking desperately sad one minute over "poor dear old Dick," and radiantly happy the next about a "perfect gem of a coat for baby—and *such* a bargain!"

How smooth and simplified were their lives, the wheels running along at calm easy speed from start to finish! And his? Urquhart sat down in the arm-chair, tired and depressed. His "lines" had fallen to him in a rugged place, and he suddenly felt old—that age which is not

reckoned by years, but by heart beats—the age which passes over the old in years to touch with withering hand some glad young life, and turn the green leaf of youth into the seared one of early blight. Those are the lives that are old—then it is that age is hard to bear.

There came a faint rustle outside on the staircase, the tap of light heels on the oil-clothed landing, then a rap at his door.

“Come in!” called Urquhart, in an uninviting, unexpectant tone. “Who the deuce is here?” he added to himself. “Come in!” he shouted more loudly as the door still remained closed. The handle then turned as if by an uncertain touch, and the door slowly opened.

“Great heavens! Rose! You! What brings you here at this hour?”

Mrs. Elliott came on into the room and shut the door behind her. Her cloak was moving strangely, the next moment Nipper jumped out.

“You forgot Nipper,” she said quietly.

Urquhart was too much taken aback at this apparition to do more than stare at her blankly. Her long cloak fell about her in heavy folds, and a scarf of black lace almost concealed her head. She untied this nervously, flung it aside, and unclasping her cloak, let it drop from her shoulders. The bitter hard look was round her mouth, and her blue eyes were wild and dark with misery. Nevertheless, she looked rarely lovely, a distracting vision to appear to any

man, in her dead black gown, unrelieved by colour save the gleaming ivory of her neck and arms. Round her throat was clasped his snake.

What had she come for? They had parted a couple of days ago, without the "scene," it is true, that Urquhart had so dreaded, but also without any of those small caresses and soothings which he had picturesquely dreamed about. She had been like an icicle at that interview, and one does not do much in the way of petting an icicle; she had betrayed by neither sign nor word that he was hurting her in the least. There had even been a smile on her white lips now and then as she had listened to him while he aired his views on the political and geographical aspect of the place, and he had promised to send her some curios home when he got there. She had looked at him then for a moment, but all through she had been strangely quiet, scarcely speaking. Her silence was the cloak about her to conceal the torn heart beneath, which speech might have exposed unpleasantly to view. It would have spoilt his remembrance of her. One looks with delight on a beautiful exterior, but might shudder and turn away revolted from what lay beneath that fair erection.

She advanced now in a slightly halting way, like a person walks after recovering from a faint, not quite sure how far their strength will take them, until she faced him as he leaned half-paralysed against the mantelshelf.

"Oh, Dick, you are angry! You are vexed at seeing me! Forgive me—oh, don't look at me like that! I cannot bear it. Don't you see it is killing me? How can I let you go?"

"Rose, what can I say but that you must go? You *must* not stay here—it is not safe. Think of yourself. If anyone saw you come in——"

"How do you suppose I got here without being seen?" she asked, and her voice, though very low, was harsh. "My coachman drove me here, of course. What does it matter to me—what does anything matter? I have left my home."

"What!" he roared. "Rose, are you mad? What do you mean?" He seized her hands in his and stooped to look in her face. He was half afraid. The change he saw there shocked him. Was that his handiwork? He spoke more tenderly to her: "Dear little woman, think what you are saying! It cannot be true."

"Oh, it is true enough."

It is a crisis in our life which proves how little real hold, after all, the conventionalities have on us. The most straight-laced among us can go mad on occasion, and when it comes to the final push, it is generally the woman who has the strength to first loose her hold on all that has hitherto held her firm; the man, even in moments of supreme emotion, can pause to think; the woman rushes madly on. So now, while Urquhart was sorely exercised as to how

he should keep this visit dark, how get the wife back to her home without scandal or any "deuced awkwardness," Rose was absorbed by him, his personality was dominating her, and all else was as naught to her. Past, present, and future were here in the man who held her soul as he held her wrists, in his hands.

She leaned against him, and heavy sobs convulsed her. "Yes, I am mad, Dick; you say rightly. I have tried to let you go—God knows how I have fought with myself!—I have even tried to hate you, to see only how you were playing me false, and to loathe you for it, but I only get to care for you more desperately with every beat of my heart. To-night it became unendurable. I cannot live without you. God should not have been so cruel to fill my heart with love like this. I never wanted it, I never asked Him for it! It is cruel, cruel to give us these awful longings and mean them only to gnaw our own hearts to pieces, bit by bit, because there is nothing else for them to feed on, and while they have life they will not starve! And the bigger one's heart has grown with love and longing, the more there is of it to be eaten up and the longer the pain lasts. Oh, Dick, if you must leave me, in pity kill me first. I would rather die by your hand than go on living without you. The one is a quick death, and it could not hurt if *you* did it, the other is—a living hell."

She pulled her hands away from his hold, and flung her arms about his neck, and bent her head back to gaze into his eyes with a look of passionate abandonment that turned him giddy. The excitement had brought the bright colour in a flood to her face, and her white bosom heaved with her heavy tearless sobs. She saw the relenting in his face, and her clasp tightened.

"Dick, Dick, let me come too! Take me with you! I can bear anything with you, nothing without you. I *know* what it is to have you go, and I cannot face another such time. Dick! speak to me! Oh, my darling, say you love me still! Say you love me so much that if you cannot take me with you, you will kill me!"

Now he saw the wrong he had done her. His cowardice had made him shirk his duty; his weakness had led him on to this. He ought to have told her all at the very first. For the sake of sparing her some pain *then* he had brought her to *this* to-night! Yet it must be done. When once a weak will is screwed to the "sticking place," it generally stays. The road which had led him back to the path of honour had been too inexpressibly painful to climb for him to risk any dallying now for fear he might find himself slipping back on the old tracks.

So by way of telling her gently what must

now be told, he put his arm round her and soothed her with low words and small touches to her golden hair, much like a mother croons to her child, and under his influence the laboured sobs gradually subsided into occasional convulsive gasps. When she had quieted down he placed her tenderly into his chair, and knelt down beside her, speaking to her in the same coaxing way he had caressed her.

"Now, Rose, little woman, try to be reasonable, and face the thing squarely. You know in yourself that this has been madness. Just think sensibly for a minute, and you will see for yourself that it can never be. We both knew that it was all a mad spell of happiness. Such things can never come to more than a waking to the realities after a time. You must forget all about me; I am not worth a thought; and go home like a sensible little girl." He spoke lightly, but all the same his heart was beating in a remarkably uncomfortable way, and he felt anything but reassured.

"It is impossible!" she cried, feverishly. "Haven't I told you—don't you understand? I have left my home for ever. I have run away, Dick. I have no one but you!"

"Good Lord!" Urquhart got on to his feet. This was indeed—to put it mildly, and as he certainly did *not* put it so to himself—awkward. Men are not often ready for an emergency; they like to be prepared; they cannot jump to

conclusions, and act with a haste a woman similarly situated does.

"Oh, don't go away. Stay here close beside me. I feel afraid if you leave me. Let me tell you." She pulled him down to her side again. "I did try, Dick; indeed I did, not to think about you. I even left London, and went to Malvern, but that drove me quite mad, and I came back. I hated everyone and everything, and John most of all. I tried to make him jealous—anything, so that he would hate me too, and at last I succeeded. He saw your—this," and she touched the snake on her neck.

"But you explained, Rose? You never——" gasped Urquhart.

"Oh, no; I explained nothing. I would answer nothing at first. Why should I tell him why you had sent it to me? That is my affair."

"Excuse me, but I think that it is very much *my* affair! You must indeed be mad. Don't you see what construction he might put on it? I have no right to give presents to you, his wife. You are not a child, Rose; though, by God! I think you are a fool! You know the ways of the world. You are his wife, married to him——"

"Married to him!" she echoed, as she sprang up and faced him, tearing at her left hand with her right one. "Why did *you* not

remember that before? There!" She flung the golden circlet—sign manual of that married tie—at his feet. "*Marricd to him!* In the sight of Heaven, I am *your* wife. I love you. I have never loved any man but you, and you know it!"

"Ah, you think this; you say all this too late, Rose. Once you had me, and you let me go. You cannot play with a man as you did with your doll. A man is not stuffed with sawdust to lie on the ground where he was left until the woman chooses to pick him up again. Oh, no; he is flesh and blood with feelings like her own, and if he has a grain of sense he gets up and walks away. You should 'remember,' too, Rose."

"Oh, Dick, have pity! You ought to have been strong enough for me as well as yourself. You were a man, and I was so young, so young," her voice breaking pitifully. "I was only a girl—only just seventeen, and I did not even know what love was like then. Oh, if I only did not know it *now!* Then there was my mother—you knew her. I had to trust to her to guide my life. Girls are so ignorant. They are taught to believe that love is almost wicked—at any rate, improper, which is worse—a sort of thing that is not mentioned until after the man has actually proposed. A man loves and says so—owns it up, and it is all right. A girl must hide it all, and pretend it is

not even there. Then if anything goes wrong, and there are difficulties in the way, she is told it is 'nonsense.' Nonsense! The greatest, holiest gift that God gave man and woman is spoken of like that! Yes, she is assured it is only imagination, and that she will 'soon get over it.' *Get over it!*"—she wrung her ringless hands together in a very agony of despair. "It has taken me five years to get over it, and to-night, after five long sickening years, Dick, it has *got over me*. It has brought me to the very dust—at a *man's feet*! Do you think I don't loathe myself? I am not doing this of myself. I could no more help coming here to-night than I can help the torture that has been with me since the moment I saw you in Bombay—and *knew*. I wish I had died then," she broke off, wearily.

"Oh, Rose, my poor little girl," he began, feebly. "I did not think——"

"No; of course you did not *think*!" she burst in. "Men never *do* think where it concerns their pleasure for the moment. They secure that first, and think after—when they are satiated. *That* is when men think."

"My God, Rose, you are bitter!"

"And what has made me bitter? Was I bitter when you won my heart five years ago? Was I even bitter when we met again that day in the hotel? You were not fair to me then. You had still a man's wide experience, against which a woman's is as nothing. You knew the

dangers ahead, and you tempted me on to the rocks. Why did you not remember then, and all these days since, that I was married—and make me remember it too? It might have nearly broken my heart then, but at any rate I should have been spared this. I was wax in your hands; you have always held me for good or evil, and evil you have willed it to be. They did not seem like rocks then, as we drifted along. Now I know I shall be dashed to pieces on them, unless"—her voice was a whisper—"unless you save me. You can, Dick, and only you."

She covered up her face with her trembling white hands. He was powerless before this new Rose, whose woman's ruined life lay exposed—wrecked by him! Oh, how madly, how blindly, how absorbingly she loved him!—this poor weak man who had not found the courage even yet to tell her the truth. A horrible temptation was assailing him as he looked down on the small crouching figure, and watched the light catch the golden threads of her hair. Should he risk all in one mad throw and take her with him? But afterwards—later on? Well, in that country whither he was going, a man might have two wives. Why should he not return to the Afghan life he had once led—Islamite in faith, Islamite in deed? Which did he love after all?

Her white bare arms stole up round his neck again, and as the velvet softness of her flesh

touched his a sudden whirl of awakened passion swept him before it. He flung his arms about her, and strained her to him, raining kisses on her mouth, her eyes, her brow. And at the last supreme moment his good angel fought for him, and Dick Urquhart's honour was, even at that crisis, snatched from the burning.

As Rose moved her head suddenly, his hand caught her hair. The rich coils already loosened, fell rippling over his shoulder and arm. The sight of the tumbling masses awoke him. Memory sprang into life and stabbed him back into full consciousness. Just so had another woman's long hair fallen about him in heavy clinging tresses—his *wife's*!

He pushed her roughly away. His face was livid, his eyes glowing like a hunted animal's, and his voice hoarse to indistinctness as he gasped :

“Go, leave me! I am a devil, Rose. Fly from me as from the plague!”

She staggered back and caught the edge of the table to stop herself from falling completely. She was trembling with terror. Had he gone mad? His expression was awful as he stood there with starting eyes.

“Dick, what is it? Oh, speak to me, do not look like that!” and she tried to take his hand. Her hair was lying like a yellow mantle about her, and he turned away from the sight of it.

“I am mad—no, not mad, sane now. Rose, I can't bear to look at you—you must go! Do

you hear? go now, before I do something desperate. No, listen!" he cried the next moment, "Hear the truth at last. That will cure you—and well for you if it does! I am married—I have a wife already, and I am going back to her to-morrow."

A long silence followed. His confession had taken the strength out of him, and he sank weakly on to a chair and buried his head in his propped-up arms. Rose stood near, like one turned to stone. By degrees something died out of her face and that became stone too, even her eyes looked like dark blue stones from which the fire has gone. Presently she put out one hand and laid it softly on his head.

"I half knew it, Dick," she said, "but too late to help me."

"You knew it?" He turned up his face and looked at her.

"Yes. Sometimes I feared it before, but I think I knew it for sure that day I met you at the Academy. You saw *her* in that picture."

"How could you tell that? I never spoke——"

"Your eyes did—your eyes were saying to that picture what they"—a pause as if for breath—"what they once used to say to me. You see I know their language, Dick. What they once said to me!" she repeated low to herself, and her hand slipped off his head and fell nervelessly to her side.

Urquhart hid his face again and Rose saw his shoulders heave. The next moment the silence of the room was broken by that most terrible sound, a man's sob. Nipper stirred uneasily from his sleep, crept to his master's feet, and put his paws up to his knee and gave a low whine. Rose bore it for a few minutes, her hands clenching themselves in and out, and her teeth pressed down on her white lip, then her love, not killed even yet—perhaps all the stronger for the fiery blast which was on it—burst up, and she flung her arms wildly about him, and pillowed his head on her breast.

“Oh, Dick, my darling, my love, hush! I cannot endure this! It is worse than everything else put together! Oh, stop, stop! I can bear the pain myself, but it kills me to see *you* like this, my poor, poor love!”

“Rose!” It was beyond his comprehension to understand the amazing strength of a woman's love when it has touched the highest point of all—self-abandonment. “You can bear to touch me, to speak to me!”

“Don't I love you? What can alter that? Don't you love me? What else matters—what else can matter ever? Nothing! You are all the world to me. You will not ask me to go with you because you think it—it would ruin my life—be too great a sacrifice, but—but—oh, Dick,” she laid her white tear-stained cheek down on the top of his head, and her arms

closed more closely round his neck, "I care nothing for that. I care for nothing, absolutely nothing, only you. To be with you I would face everything, I would go to the North Pole or the Desert of Sahara, anywhere, it would matter nothing if you were there with me. I have waited all these last days, hoping, fearing. I knew you were fighting with yourself, thinking of my good, what I should suffer through the world, fearing I might not have courage to face it. You do not realise that my love could drive me against my pride, my self-respect, to where I am now, begging for what you have not yet offered. But I know you wanted to offer it, only you held back for my sake. I have no pride, no honour, no anything where you are concerned, only love!"

Oh, what was this! Where had he drifted? Great heavens! This must be stopped—it was driving him crazy. He groaned aloud. She had not grasped the truth yet. He got up, went over to the sideboard, filled up a tumbler with brandy, and gulped it down. That might give him spurious strength, and it did. The fire flowed maddeningly through his veins, touched his brain; he was reeling already. A hideous laugh broke from him. Brutal roughness seemed to be the only tactic he had by him now. All finer feelings were scorched by that fiery demon within him.

"Rose, listen!" He leaned with his hands

on the table and stared at her across it, his eyes growing rapidly bloodshot and his hair all ruffled. She noticed for the first time the grey showing through the brown. "This must end. It is driving us both mad. Don't you understand me? I tell you I am *married*—I have a wife—my duty is to her, my honour——"

"Your *what*?" His eyes flickered and fell. "You and I need neither of us talk of that. I am married as the world calls it, but I hold myself bound to you, the man who owns all my love, not to the one who took me to the altar, and stood by while I swore those false vows, lies every word I uttered, and they knew it. *That is no marriage.*"

"Stop! No more. *I am married to the woman who owns all my love.* Now you know. I am going back to my wife—the mother of my dead child. I—love—her."

Rose came round the table slowly up to him, laid her hand on his arm, and impelled him towards her. The stony look was back on her face again.

"Say that again. Let me hear it once more to make quite sure."

He did not speak. If ever man paid for his folly this man did it now, as he shrank away from the dawning scorn in the woman's face beside him. He simply could not bear to look at her. He had ruined her mentally and

morally, shattered her faith in all that is pure and noble between man and woman. And she was still only on the threshold of life, so young yet. The white cheeks had still the rounded freshness of girlhood, the soft skin was lineless, the mouth that he had sealed his for ever—— Ah, no! The youth was gone from that. There spoke the truth of what this hour had been to her.

“Dick,” she shook his arm a little, “don’t torture me like this. Speak the truth, if a man ever does speak the truth to a woman. You—you love—her? I *will* have the truth.”

“I have told you, Rose. Why prolong this interview? No good can come of it,” he cried miserably.

“And you loved her all the time, when you met me in Bombay, on that voyage home, when you kissed me, held me in your arms, you loved her, you were married to her, there was the holiest of all ties between you—your child—yours and hers? My God!”

“I did not know—it came upon me like a flash—now I see my cursed weakness, and——”

She flung him from her with a gesture, superb in its scorn and despair, and stooping picked up her cloak and began to wrap it round her.

“Rose, don’t let us part like this! It is too horrible! Where are you going? What will you do? I thought you said you had left your home?”

“What is it to you what I do? Go back to

your home and never mind me. Ah!" She choked down her sobs. "The hours I have spent picturing the loneliness you were going to face, and all the time—— Oh, Dick, how could you be so cruel to me? It is a cowardly thing to have made the woman suffer so for the weakness of her girlhood. A poor revenge. A woman's heart is so much bigger to suffer than a girl's. But I will deny you nothing—you have made me pay for any pain I once gave to you—if that is any satisfaction to you to hear." "Only forgive me!" he pleaded, and tried to take her hand, but she drew it quickly under her cloak. "We shall never, if there is a God of Mercy at all, meet again. You cannot go like that."

For a moment she wavered, and a look as of thawing crossed the frozen features. But it passed as she suddenly twisted the snake from off her neck and laid it on the table by him.

"No, we shall never meet again, you and I, Dick. It can make no difference what becomes of me any more than it mattered to you what became of your—that other woman when you left her. God help her, and me, and all foolish women who place their *all* in a man's keeping!"

"In the name of God, Rose, do you take me for a fiend?"

"Oh no, only a man who thinks a woman fair sport. Bah!" she shuddered. "Ugh! How I loathe myself! Shall I ever get the dust off my

soul that love of you has dragged it through ?” She turned the knob of the door. Nipper got up, came towards her from custom, then went back to Urquhart, torn asunder between love and duty. In fact, it was a little difficult altogether for Nipper, between these swaying human emotions, to rightly know whose dog he was. Rose looked at the dog, and from the dog to the man. Big tears were standing in the once merry bonny blue eyes. She saw them, and the next moment a sudden passion of love came over her.

“ I forgive you ! Never say I did not love you, Dick ! Good-bye ! Good-bye ! ” For one moment her arms were about him, the next he heard the door close upon her, and a moment later the roll of the wheels in the street below as her carriage bore her away. Nipper breathed a huge sigh of relief, walked from the door, and curled himself up. “ Sufficient for the moment ” was his creed.

An hour later, old Colonel Urquhart, tired of sitting in the smoking-room at Morley's, walked across to St. James's Street to see what was delaying his son. The sleepy porter let him in, and he went upstairs, tapped several times on the door, but receiving no answer, save a growl from Nipper, went in.

Dick was lying on the couch in a heavy, un-restful sleep, his face livid, and the veins swelled in his down-hanging hand. On the table beside

an empty tumbler and a bottle, lay a glittering snake, the green eyes and changing opal head of which gleamed uncannily at the intruder as he crossed the room to the sleeper's side. His foot trod on something. He stooped down and picked up a small gold ring, a woman's wedding ring. Nipper walked round him restlessly, yawned audibly, and then returned to the foot of the couch where he had been lying. He did not approve of this interruption to their seclusion; he did not feel very safe, either, his doggy deductions being rather wobbly as to his ultimate fate; men were such undependable creatures. There was the constant dread with him always that someone had designs upon him, and meant to take possession of him, and drag him off from the only master he would ever really own.

"My poor boy! My poor, poor Dick!" said the Colonel as he stood staring at the ring lying on his palm and then at the haggard unconscious face on the cushion. "Thank God, your mother cannot see you to-night!" His eyes grew dim as he gazed on the wreck of the bright, handsome lad who had gone with him in the flush of expectant glory to buy his sword. "I will let him have his sleep out, and he need never know how near I came to his skeleton." He put the ring back on the floor where Urquhart's eyes must light on it directly he awoke, and quietly left the room.

CHAPTER XXV.

HAVE you ever experienced a nightmare—hours (though scientists assure us it is but minutes) of horror, when you are pitchforked through a sequence of events with no power of your own to stay or alter in any way your course? One after another you pelt through them until you plunge out at the other end of this sort of dark tunnel, breathless and gasping, head throbbing and eyes swimming. Looking back upon it afterwards you can recall nothing clearly; here and there distinct horrors stand out, but the general impression left when you at last awake is that you couldn't go through with it again if you tried.

In some such manner did Urquhart ever afterwards recall that journey to India. He started with but one idea—to get there quickly. Everything was made subservient to that resolve. The demon rider was jockey again, and the horse had no relief from the prickings of those twin spurs, longing and fear. He pressed forward night and day until—

“The wind was left behind
In the speed of his desire.”

There is no whip like a bad conscience when it has awakened to a sense of its wrong-doing.

He had originally taken his berth in a steamer starting from Southampton, but he changed his mind the morning of his start, and with a hurried scramble crossed to Calais, and tearing across the Continent, caught an earlier boat at Brindisi. This cut off some days of suspense. He was like a caged lion during that shortened sea voyage, knowing no rest night nor day. And his brain had no respite either. Plans seethed there incessantly. Sometimes, try as he would, the future showed only a black front, again a golden ray of hope shot across it.

On arrival at Peshawur Urquhart met the chief of the expedition, and there sprang up between them at once that touch of *camaraderie* which exists among soldiers of a certain type. This sense of friendship encouraged Urquhart to confide in him his story and the real object of *his* mission, and then he begged and won permission to send on a trusty messenger to Ahmed Khan, announcing his return and imploring him to meet him with Zorayda. The consent of the chief was the more easily won as he recognised the manifest advantage to his mission which might accrue from alliance with a man of the Khan's standing and influence.

The crooked path at last seemed straightening, and Urquhart's oppressed heart beat more freely as he saw the way to atonement and honour being made smooth before him.

The expedition started, and as the pennons

of the guide cavalry dotted the slopes of the valley below Khelat, the old Khan and his retainers were seen riding down the hill. Through his field glasses Urquhart made out the big form of Serafrauz and the lither figure of Afzul, one on each side of the Ahmed Khan. His heart throbbed heavily against his ribs, the more so when closer inspection showed how threatening was their aspect. They were assuming a formation such as must inevitably close the advance. Blue turbans and the muzzles of jezails could be seen peeping over the rocks of the defile, awakening memories in Urquhart's mind of that day, now long past, when he had stood near this spot alone to face his fate.

He went up now to Colonel Carruthers and fearlessly asked to be allowed to go on alone to meet the Khan.

As he rode out, a solitary figure detached itself from the group, and he saw the Khan coming to meet him with no friendly sign of greeting. The two men halted and stared into each other's eyes. Urquhart was shocked to see the awful alteration those few short months had wrought in the old chief. The erstwhile proudly erect figure stooped wearily on the horse, the beard was white now, and the fire had died down from the keen eyes. It was an old broken-down man who came slowly across the intervening space, for whom the light of life was quenched, never to be rekindled.

Urquhart waited, with an impatience which turned each second into an eternity, for the Khan to speak. But he never moved from his silent attitude, and at last, despite himself, the word "Zorayda!" burst from Urquhart's whitening lips.

"Patience, Feringhee!" answered the deep slow tones. "Thou wert ever hot-headed and didst think the world was made for thee! Thou hast yet to learn it turns not at *thy* bidding only. Thou canst not drop and pick up at thy leisure."

"Zorayda, my wife!" Urquhart cried again, a horrible foreboding thrilling through him with chill shiver to his heart. "Speak to me of her! Tell me quickly! Thou hast something to say?"

"Ay, I have something to say to thee. I *could* say much, but I will leave that to a better spokesman than I am. *Thy conscience*, sahib, will say to thee in words of fire which will never die, what my tongue fails me to utter. Thou didst think to gather my sweet flower, to wear while it pleased thee. Good! Thou hast had thy pleasure, but—no more remains. Flowers that are broken from the stem——" There was a long pause of horrible silence while the two men still faced each other on their reined-in steeds. The word, unspoken but understood, echoed down into Urquhart's heart and turned it into stone.

In vain—all in vain! Repentance had come too late, atonement there was none.

"I will be just," said the Khan at last, with a supreme effort. "I had meant to punish thee by withholding from thee the truth. But for *her* sake thou shalt hear it." Something in the darkening misery on the young man's face touched him in spite of his bitter resolve. "She loved thee to the end," he went on, "and she died with thy name on her lips, and clasping this. I took it from her fingers to keep, but it is thine."

And he laid in Urquhart's palm a crushed bit of cardboard, blurred and nearly rubbed from all semblance to a portrait by the feverish hand which had so persistently clung to it through all, but just dimly showing the golden hair and fair colouring of a girl's face.

"She died with *this* before her! My God! And I can never tell her—never explain——"

"It were wiser so to live that explanations were not needed. They generally fail to satisfy, or else they come too late. Farewell, Feringhee. Thou hast escaped the Khyber—tempt it not again. An Afghan's thirst for revenge is not to be allayed—thou hast learnt that by hard lessons. But methinks"—he looked keenly at Urquhart—"that Zorayda's death *is* revenged. Enough. Thou and thy fellows may pass. But—do not thou come this way again. Afzul still lives. I have warned thee."

He turned his bridle rein, and, making a sign, the Afghan pickets and scouts began to retire.

Urquhart sat like one transfixed until the mission overtook him. A few brief words explained to his chief that there was no further danger, and the force moved on along the valley to the bend of the gorge where Khelat was lost to view in the mists of the mountain top.

But the sun which kissed the flowers on Zorayda's tomb shone on the brilliant pennons of the small cavalcade, and warmed to faint colour the white face of the Englishman who carried a dead heart beneath his rigid soldier-like breast, and who looked out with eyes as unseeing as those of the old Cid Campeador when he rode as a corpse at the head of his troops.

How tired old Sol must be of the futile loves of foolish mortals! How glad to grow cold and see no more the misery of this poor earth, where mistakes are left unrighted, and where hearts are graves of buried hopes!

THE END.

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